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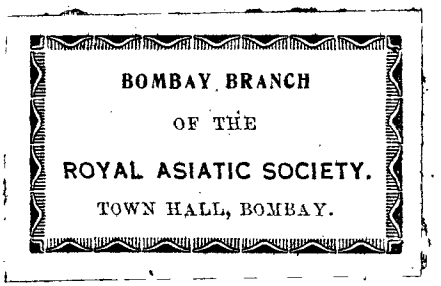

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THE NEW MAGDALEN.

A Novel.

BY

WILKIE COLLINS.

"Lead Us Not Into Temptation."

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON.
1873.

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THE NEW MAGDALEN.

SECOND SCENE—(*Continued*).

CHAPTER THE EIGHTEENTH.

THE SEARCH IN THE GROUNDS.

WHILE Mercy was almost in Julian's arms, while her bosom was just touching his—before a word more had passed his lips or hers—the library door opened.

Lady Janet Roy entered the room.

Grace Roseberry, still listening in the conservatory, saw the door open, and recognised the mistress of the house. She softly drew back and placed herself in safer hiding, beyond the range of view from the dining-room.

Lady Janet advanced no further than the

threshold. She stood there and looked at her nephew and her adopted daughter in stern silence.

Mercy dropped into the chair at her side. Julian kept his place by her. His mind was still stunned by the discovery that had burst on it; his eyes still rested on her in a mute terror of inquiry. He was as completely absorbed in the one act of looking at her as if they had been still alone together in the room.

Lady Janet was the first of the three who spoke. She addressed herself to her nephew.

"You were right, Mr. Julian Gray," she said, with her bitterest emphasis of tone and manner. "You ought to have found nobody in this room on your return but *me*. I detain you no longer. You are free to leave my house."

Julian looked round at his aunt. She was pointing to the door. In the excited state of his sensibilities at that moment, the action stung him to the quick. He answered without his customary consideration for his aunt's age and his aunt's position towards him.

"You apparently forget, Lady Janet, that

you are not speaking to one of your footmen," he said. "There are serious reasons (of which you know nothing) for my remaining in your house a little longer. You may rely upon my trespassing on your hospitality as short a time as possible."

He turned again to Mercy as he said those words, and surprised her timidly looking up at him. In the instant when their eyes met, the tumult of emotions struggling in him became suddenly stilled. Sorrow for her—compassionating sorrow—rose in the new calm and filled his heart. Now, and now only, he could read in the wasted and noble face how she had suffered. The pity which he had felt for the unnamed woman grew to a tenfold pity for *her*. The faith which he had professed—honestly professed—in the better nature of the unnamed woman strengthened into a tenfold faith in *her*. He addressed himself again to his aunt in a gentler tone. "This lady," he resumed, "has something to say to me in private which she has not said yet. That is my reason and my apology for not immediately leaving the house."

Still under the impression of what she had

seen on entering the room, Lady Janet looked at him in angry amazement. Was Julian actually ignoring Horace Holmcroft's claims, in the presence of Horace Holmcroft's betrothed wife? She appealed to her adopted daughter. "Grace!" she exclaimed, "have you heard him? Have you nothing to say? Must I remind you"——

She stopped. For the first time in Lady Janet's experience of her young companion, she found herself speaking to ears that were deaf to her. Mercy was incapable of listening. Julian's eyes had told her that Julian understood her at last!

Lady Janet turned to her nephew once more, and addressed him in the hardest words that she had ever spoken to her sister's son:

"If you have any sense of decency," she said—"I say nothing of a sense of honour—you will leave my house, and your acquaintance with that lady will end here. Spare me your protests and excuses; I can place but one interpretation on what I saw when I opened that door."

"You entirely misunderstand what you saw

when you opened that door," Julian answered quietly.

"Perhaps I misunderstand the confession which you made to me, not an hour ago?" retorted Lady Janet.

Julian cast a look of alarm at Mercy. "Don't speak of it!" he said, in a whisper. "She might hear you."

"Do you mean to say she doesn't know you are in love with her?"

"Thank God, she has not the faintest suspicion of it!"

There was no mistaking the earnestness with which he made that reply. It proved his innocence as nothing else could have proved it. Lady Janet drew back a step—utterly bewildered; completely at a loss what to say or what to do next.

The silence that followed was broken by a knock at the library door. The man-servant—with news, and bad news, legibly written in his disturbed face and manner—entered the room.

In the nervous irritability of the moment, Lady Janet resented the servant's appearance as a positive offence on the part of the

harmless man. "Who sent for you?" she asked sharply. "What do you mean by interrupting us?"

The servant made his excuses in an oddly bewildered manner.

"I beg your ladyship's pardon. I wished to take the liberty—I wanted to speak to Mr. Julian Gray."

"What is it?" asked Julian.

The man looked uneasily at Lady Janet, hesitated, and glanced at the door, as if he wished himself well out of the room again.

"I hardly know if I can tell you, sir, before her ladyship," he answered.

Lady Janet instantly penetrated the secret of her servant's hesitation.

"I know what has happened!" she said. "That abominable woman has found her way here again. Am I right?"

The man's eyes helplessly consulted Julian.

"Yes? or no?" cried Lady Janet, imperatively.

"Yes, my lady."

Julian at once assumed the duty of asking the necessary questions.

"Where is she?" he began.

"Somewhere in the grounds, as we suppose, sir."

"Did *you* see her?"

"No, sir."

"Who saw her?"

"The lodge-keeper's wife."

This looked serious. The lodge-keeper's wife had been present while Julian had given his instructions to her husband. She was not likely to have mistaken the identity of the person whom she had discovered.

"How long since?" Julian asked next.

"Not very long, sir."

"Be more particular. *How* long?"

"I didn't hear, sir."

"Did the lodge-keeper's wife speak to the person when she saw her?"

"No, sir; she didn't get the chance, as I understand it. She is a stout woman, I know, remember. The other was too quick for her—discovered her, sir; and (as the saying is) gave her the slip."

"In what part of the grounds did this happen?"

The servant pointed in the direction of the side-hall. "In that part, sir. Either in the

Dutch garden or the shrubbery. I am not sure which."

It was plain, by this time, that the man's information was too imperfect to be practically of any use. Julian asked if the lodge-keeper's wife was in the house.

"No, sir. Her husband has gone out to search the grounds in her place, and she is minding the gate. They sent their boy with the message. From what I can make out from the lad, they would be thankful if they could get a word more of advice from you, sir."

Julian reflected for a moment.

So far as he could estimate them, the probabilities were that the stranger from Mannheim had already made her way into the house; that she had been listening in the billiard-room; that she had found time enough to escape him on his approaching to open the door; and that she was now (in the servant's phrase) "somewhere in the grounds," after eluding the pursuit of the lodge-keeper's wife.

The matter was serious. Any mistake in dealing with it might lead to very painful

If Julian had correctly anticipated the nature of the confession which Mercy had been on the point of addressing to him, the person whom he had been the means of introducing into the house, was—what she had vainly asserted herself to be—no other than the true Grace Roseberry.

Taking this for granted, it was of the utmost importance that he should speak to Grace privately, before she committed herself to any rashly-renewed assertion of her claims, and before she could gain access to Lady Janet's adopted daughter. The landlady at her lodgings had already warned him that the object which she held steadily in view was to find her way to "Miss Roseberry" when Lady Janet was not present to take her part, and when no gentlemen were at hand to protect her. "Only let me meet her face to face," (she had said), "and I will make her confess herself the impostor that she is!" As matters now stood, it was impossible to estimate too seriously the mischief which might ensue from such a meeting as this. Everything now depended on Julian's skilful management of an exasperated woman; and

nobody, at that moment, knew where the woman was.

In this position of affairs, as Julian understood it, there seemed to be no other alternative than to make his inquiries instantly at the lodge, and then to direct the search in person.

He looked towards Mercy's chair as he arrived at this resolution. It was at a cruel sacrifice of his own anxieties and his own wishes that he deferred continuing the conversation with her, from the critical point at which Lady Janet's appearance had interrupted it.

Mercy had risen while he had been questioning the servant. The attention which she had failed to accord to what had passed between his aunt and himself, she had given to the imperfect statement which he had extracted from the man. Her face plainly showed that she had listened as eagerly as Lady Janet had listened; with this remarkable difference between them, that Lady Janet looked frightened, and that Lady Janet's companion showed no signs of alarm. She

appeared to be interested; perhaps anxious—nothing more.

Julian spoke a parting word to his aunt.

"Pray compose yourself," he said. "I have little doubt, when I can learn the particulars, that we shall easily find this person in the grounds. There is no reason to be uneasy. I am going to superintend the search myself. I will return to you as soon as possible."

Lady Janet listened absently. There was a certain expression in her eyes which suggested to Julian that her mind was busy with some project of its own. He stopped as he passed Mercy, on his way out by the billiard-room door. It cost him a hard effort to control the contending emotions, which the mere act of looking at her now awakened in him. His heart beat fast, his voice sank low, as he spoke to her:

"You shall see me again," he said. "I never was more in earnest in promising you my truest help and sympathy than I am now."

She understood him. Her bosom heaved painfully; her eyes fell to the ground—she

When he turned to close the billiard-room door, he heard Lady Janet say, "I will be with you again in a moment, Grace; don't go away."

Interpreting these words as meaning that his aunt had some business of her own to attend to in the library, he shut the door.

He had just advanced into the smoking-room beyond, when he thought he heard the door opened again. He turned round. Lady Janet had followed him.

"Do you wish to speak to me?" he asked.

"I want something of you," Lady Janet answered, "before you go."

"What is it?"

"Your card."

"My card?"

"You have just told me not to be uneasy," said the old lady. "I *am* uneasy, for all that. I don't feel as sure as you do that this woman really is in the grounds. She may be lurking somewhere in the house, and she may

appear when your back is turned. Remember what you told me."

Julian understood the allusion. He made no reply.

"The people at the police-station close by," pursued Lady Janet, "have instructions to send an experienced man, in plain clothes, to any address indicated on your card the moment they receive it. That is what you told me. For Grace's protection, I want your card before you leave us."

It was impossible for Julian to mention the reasons which now forbade him to make use of his own precautions—in the very face of the emergency which they had been especially designed to meet. How could he declare the true Grace Roseberry to be mad? How could he give the true Grace Roseberry into custody? On the other hand, he had personally pledged himself (when the circumstances appeared to require it) to place the means of legal protection from insult and annoyance at his aunt's disposal. And now there stood Lady Janet, unaccustomed to have her wishes disregarded by anybody, with her hand extended, waiting for the card!

What was to be done? The one way out of the difficulty appeared to be to submit for the moment. If he succeeded in discovering the missing woman, he could easily take care that she should be subjected to no needless indignity. If she contrived to slip into the house in his absence, he could provide against that contingency by sending a second card privately to the police-station, forbidding the officer to stir in the affair until he had received further orders. Julian made one stipulation only, before he handed his card to his aunt.

"You will not use this, I am sure, without positive and pressing necessity," he said. "But I must make one condition. Promise me to keep my plan for communicating with the police a strict secret"——

"A strict secret from Grace?" interposed Lady Janet. (Julian bowed.) "Do you suppose I want to frighten her? Do you think I have not had anxiety enough about her already? Of course I shall keep it a secret from Grace!"

Reassured on this point, Julian hastened out into the grounds. As soon as his back

was turned, Lady Janet lifted the gold pencil-case that hung at her watch-chain, and wrote on her nephew's card (for the information of the officer in plain clothes): "*We are wanted at Mablethorpe House.*" This done, she put the card into the old-fashioned pocket of her dress, and returned to the dining-room.

Grace was waiting, in obedience to the instructions which she had received.

For the first moment or two, not a word was spoken on either side. Now that she was alone with her adopted daughter, a certain coldness and hardness began to show itself in Lady Janet's manner. The discovery that she had made, on opening the drawing-room door, still hung on her mind. Julian had certainly convinced her that she had misinterpreted what she had seen; but he had convinced her against her will. "There is some secret understanding between them," thought the old lady; "and She is to blame, the women always are!"

Mercy still waited to be spoken to: pale and quiet, silent and submissive. Lady Janet

—in a highly uncertain state of temper—was obliged to begin.

"My dear!" she called out sharply.

"Yes, Lady Janet."

"How much longer are you going to sit there, with your mouth shut up and your eyes on the carpet? Have you no opinion to offer on this alarming state of things? You heard what the man said to Julian—I saw you listening. Are you horribly frightened?"

"No, Lady Janet."

"Not even nervous?"

"No, Lady Janet."

"Ha! I should hardly have given you credit for so much courage after my experience of you a week ago. I congratulate you on your recovery. Do you hear? I congratulate you on your recovery."

"Thank you, Lady Janet."

"I am not so composed as you are. We were an excitable set in *my* youth—and I haven't got the better of it yet. I feel nervous. Do you hear? I feel nervous."

"I am sorry, Lady Janet."

"You are very good. Do you know what I am going to do?"

"No, Lady Janet."

"I am going to summon the household. When I say the household, I mean the men; the women are of no use. I am afraid I shall fail to attract your attention?"

"You have my best attention, Lady Janet."

"You are very good again. I said the women were of no use."

"Yes, Lady Janet?"

"I mean to place a man-servant on guard at every entrance to the house. I am going to do it at once. Will you come with me?"

"Can I be of any use if I go with your ladyship?"

"You can't be of the slightest use. I give the orders in this house—not you. I had quite another motive in asking you to come with me. I am more considerate of you than you seem to think—I don't like leaving you here by yourself. Do you understand?"

"I am much obliged to your ladyship. I don't mind being left here by myself."

"You don't mind? I never heard of such heroism in my life—out of a novel.

Suppose that crazy wretch should find her way in here?"

"She would not frighten me this time as she frightened me before."

"Not too fast, my young lady! Suppose ——— Good Heavens! now I think of it, there is the conservatory. Suppose she should be hidden in there? Julian is searching the grounds. Who is to search the conservatory?"

"With your ladyship's permission, *I* will search the conservatory."

"You!!!"

"With your ladyship's permission."

"I can hardly believe my own ears! Well, 'Live and learn' is an old proverb. I thought I knew your character. This is a change!"

"You forget, Lady Janet (if I may venture to say so), that the circumstances are changed. She took me by surprise on the last occasion; I am prepared for her now."

"Do you really feel as coolly as you look?"

"Yes, Lady Janet."

"Have your own way then. I shall go

one thing, however, in case of your having over-estimated your own courage. I shall place one of the men in the library. You will only have to ring for him, if anything happens. He will give the alarm—and I shall act accordingly. I have my plan," said her ladyship, comfortably conscious of the card in her pocket. "Don't look as if you wanted to know what it is. I have no intention of saying anything about it—except that it will do. Once more, and for the last time—do you stay here? or do you go with me?"

"I stay here."

She respectfully opened the library door for Lady Janet's departure as she made that reply. Throughout the interview she had been carefully and coldly deferential: she had not once lifted her eyes to Lady Janet's face. The conviction in her that a few hours more would, in all probability, see her dismissed from the house, had of necessity fettered every word that she spoke—had morally separated her already from the injured mistress whose love she had won in disguise. Utterly incapable of attributing the change

on her young companion to the true motive. Lady Janet left the room to summon her home-bred garrison, thoroughly puzzled, and (as a necessary consequence of that condition) thoroughly displeased.

Still holding the library door in her hand, Mercy stood watching with a heavy heart the progress of her benefactress down the length of the room, on the way to the front hall beyond. She had honestly loved and respected the warm-hearted, quick-tempered old lady. A sharp pang of pain wrung her, as she thought of the time when even the chance utterance of her name would become an unpardonable offence in Lady Janet's house.

But there was no shrinking in her now from the ordeal of the confession. She was not only anxious, she was impatient for Julian's return. Before she slept that night, Julian's confidence in her should be a confidence that she had deserved.

Let her own the truth, without the base fear of discovery to drive her to it. Let her do justice to the woman whom she has wronged, while that woman is still powerless to oppose her. Let her sacrifice everything

that she has gained by the fraud to the sacred duty of atonement. If she can do that, then her repentance has nobly revealed the noble nature that is in her; then she is a woman to be trusted, respected, beloved." Those words were as vividly present to her as if she still heard them falling from his lips. Those other words which had followed them, rang as grandly as ever in her ears.

"Rise, poor wounded heart! Beautiful, purified soul, God's angels rejoice over you! Take your place among the noblest of God's creatures!" Did the woman live who could hear Julian Gray say that, and who could hesitate, at any sacrifice, at any loss to justify his belief in her? "Oh!" she thought, lovingly, while her eyes followed Lady Janet to the end of the library, "if your worst fears could only be realised! If I could only see Grace Roseberry in this room, how fearlessly I could meet her now!"

She closed the library door, while Lady Janet opened the other door which led into the hall.

As she turned and looked back into the dining-room, a cry of astonishment escaped her

There—as if in answer to the aspiration which was still in her mind; there, established in triumph on the chair that she had just left—sat Grace Roseberry, in sinister silence, waiting for her.

CHAPTER THE NINETEENTH.

THE EVIL GENIUS.

RECOVERING from the first overpowering sensation of surprise, Mercy rapidly advanced, eager to say her first penitent words. Grace stopped her by a warning gesture of the hand. "No nearer to me," she said, with a look of contemptuous command. "Stay where you are."

Mercy paused. Grace's reception had startled her. She instinctively took the chair nearest to her to support herself. Grace raised a warning hand for the second time, and issued another command:

"I forbid you to be seated in my presence. You have no right to be in this house at all.

[illegible] remember, if you please, who you are, and who I am."

The tone in which those words were spoken was an insult in itself. Mercy suddenly lifted her head; the angry answer was on her lips. She checked it, and submitted in silence. "I will be worthy of Julian Gray's confidence in me," she thought, as she stood meekly by the chair. "I will bear anything from the woman whom I have wronged."

In silence the two faced each other; alone together, for the first time since they had met in the French cottage. The contrast between them was strange to see. Grace Roseberry, seated in her chair, little and lean, with her dull white complexion, with her hard threatening face, with her shrunken figure clad in its plain and poor black garments, looked like a being of a lower sphere compared with Mercy Merrick, standing erect in her rich silk dress; her tall, shapely figure towering over the little creature before her; her grand head bent in graceful submission; gentle, patient, beautiful; a woman whom it was a privilege to look at and a distinction to admire. If a stranger had been told that those two [illegible]

played their parts in a romance of real life—that one of them was really connected by the ties of relationship with Lady Janet Roy, and that the other had audaciously ventured to personate her—he would inevitably, if it had been left to him to guess which was which, have picked out Grace as the counterfeit, and Mercy as the true woman.

Grace broke the silence. She had waited to open her lips until she had eyed her conquered victim all over, with disdainfully minute attention, from head to foot.

"Stand there," she said, speaking with a spiteful relish of her own cruel words. "It's no use fainting this time. You have not got Lady Janet Roy to bring you to. There are no gentlemen here to-day to pity you and pick you up. Mercy Merrick, I have got you at last. Thank God, my turn has come! You can't escape now!"

All the littleness of heart and mind which had first shown itself in Grace at the meeting in the cottage, when Mercy told the sad story of her life, now revealed itself once more. The woman who, in those past times, had

felt no impulse to take a suffering, and penitent fellow-creature by the hand, was the same woman who could feel no pity, who could spare no insolence of triumph, now Mercy's sweet voice answered her patiently in low pleading tones.

"I have not avoided you," she said. "I would have gone to you of my own accord if I had known that you were here. It is my heartfelt wish to own that I have sinned against you, and to make all the atonement that I can. I am too anxious to deserve your forgiveness, to have any fear of seeing you."

Conciliatory as the reply was, it was spoken with a simple and modest dignity of manner which roused Grace Roseberry to fury.

"How dare you speak to me as if you were my equal?" she burst out. "You stand there and answer me, as if you had a right and your place in this house. Audacious woman! I have my right and my place here; and what am I obliged to do? I am obliged to hang about in the grounds and fly from the sight of the servants, [illegible]

CHAPTER THE TWENTIETH.

THE POLICEMAN IN PLAIN CLOTHES.

JULIAN looked round the room and stopped at the door which he had just opened.

His eyes rested—first on Mercy, next on Grace.

The disturbed faces of both the women told him but too plainly that the disaster which he had dreaded had actually happened. They had met without any third person to interfere between them. To what extremities the hostile interview might have led, it was impossible for him to guess. In his aunt's presence, he could only wait his opportunity of speaking to Mercy, and be ready to interpose if anything was going

[illegible] (the Countess—and (I happen to know from the person who made them) with no result. I am safe in your place: I am known by your name. I am Grace Roseberry; and you are Mercy Merrick. Disprove it if you can!"

Summing up the unassailable security of her false position in those closing words, Mercy pointed significantly to the billiard-room door.

"You were hiding there, by your own confession," she said. "You know your way out by that door. Will you leave the room?"

"I won't stir a step!"

Mercy walked to a side-table, and struck the bell placed on it.

At the same moment, the billiard-room door opened. Julian Gray appeared—returning from his unsuccessful search in the grounds.

He had barely crossed the threshold before the library-door was thrown open next by the servant posted in the room. The man drew back respectfully, and gave admission to Lady [illegible] Roy. She was followed by Horace Holdcroft, with his mother's wedding-present—the prayer-book—in his hand.

are strangers here. I am Lady Janet's adopted daughter. Do you think she will believe your friends? She will believe me. She will burn their letters, if they write. She will forbid the house to them if they come. I shall be Mrs. Horace Holmcroft in a week's time. Who can shake *my* position? Who can injure Me?"

"Wait a little. You forget the matron of the Refuge?"

"Find her, if you can. I never told you her name. I never told you where the Refuge was."

"I will advertise your name, and find the matron in that way."

"Advertise in every newspaper in London. Do you think I gave a stranger like you the name I really bore in the Refuge? I gave you the name I assumed when I left England. No such person as Mercy Merrick is known to the matron. No such person is known to Mr. Holmcroft. He saw me in the French cottage while you were senseless on the bed. I had my grey cloak on; neither he nor any of them saw me in my nurse's dress. Inquiries have been made about me

deceive so long. Society has used me cruelly; I owe nothing to Society. I have a right to take any advantage of it if I can. I deny that I have injured you. How was I to know that you would come to life again? Have I degraded your name and your character? I have done honour to both. I have won everybody's liking and everybody's respect. Do you think Lady Janet would have loved you as she loves me? Not she! I tell you to your face, I have filled the false position more creditably than you could have filled the true one, and I mean to keep it. I won't give up your name; I won't restore your character! Do your worst, I defy you!"

She poured out those reckless words in one headlong flow which defied interruption. There was no answering her until she was too breathless to say more. Grace seized her opportunity the moment it was within her reach.

"You defy me?" she returned resolutely. "You won't defy me long. I have written to Canada. My friends will speak for me."

"What of it, if they do? Your friends

"It means," answered Mercy contemptuously, "that I recall every word I said to you just now. It means that I am resolved to keep my place in this house."

"Are you out of your senses?"

"You are not far from the bell. Ring it. Do what you told *me* to do. Call in the whole household, and ask them which of us is mad—you or I?"

"Mercy Merrick! you shall repent this to the last hour of your life!"

Mercy rose again, and fixed her flashing eyes on the woman who still defied her.

"I have had enough of you!" she said. "Leave the house while you *can* leave it. Stay here, and I will send for Lady Janet Roy."

"You can't send for her! You daren't send for her!"

"I can and I dare. You have not a shadow of a proof against me. I have got the papers. I am in possession of the place. I have established myself in Lady Janet's confidence. I mean to deserve your opinion of me—I will keep my dresses and my jewels, and my position in the house. I deny that I have

guardian angel ... closer ... the evil genius had done its evil work. The baser nature which Dorian Gray had brought to life stank, poisoned by the vile venom of a woman's spiteful tongue. An easy and a terrible means of avenging the outrage heaped on her was within Mercy's reach, if she chose to take it. In the frenzy of her indignation she never hesitated—she took it.

"Who are you?" she asked for the second time.

Grace roused herself and attempted to speak. Mercy stopped her with a scornful gesture of her hand.

"No, I remember!" she went on, with the same fiercely suppressed rage. "You are the madwoman from the German hospital who came here a week ago. I'm not afraid of you this time. Sit down and rest yourself—Mercy Merrick."

Deliberately giving her that name to her face, Mercy turned from her and took the chair which Grace had forbidden her to occupy when the interview began.

Grace started to her feet.

"What does this mean?" she asked.

your love. If Mr. Holmcroft fails you, you have got Mr. Julian Gray. Ah! you shall see me. *I'll* see that Mr. Holmcroft's eyes are opened; he shall know what a woman he might have married, but for Me!"——

She checked herself; the next refinement of insult remained suspended on her lips.

The woman whom she had outraged, suddenly advanced on her. Her eyes, staring helplessly upward, saw Mercy Merrick's face white with the terrible anger which drives the blood back on the heart, bending threateningly over her.

"'You will see that Mr. Holmcroft's eyes are opened,'" Mercy slowly repeated, "'he shall know what a woman he might have married, but for You!'"

She paused, and followed those words by a question which struck a creeping terror through Grace Roseberry, from the hair of her head to the soles of her feet:

"*Who are you?*"

The suppressed fury of look and tone which accompanied that question told, as no violence could have told it, that the limits of Mercy's endurance had been found at last. In the

pleaded. "Badly as I have behaved to you, I am still a woman like yourself. I can't face the shame of acknowledging what I have done, before the whole house. Lady Janet treats me like a daughter; Mr. Holmcroft has engaged himself to marry me. I can't tell Lady Janet and Mr. Holmcroft to their faces that I have cheated them out of their love. But they shall know it for all that. I can, and will, before I rest to-night, tell the whole truth to Mr. Julian Gray."

Grace burst out laughing. "Aha!" she exclaimed, with a cynical outburst of gaiety, "Now we have come to it last!"

"Take care!" said Mercy. "Take care!"

"Mr. Julian Gray! I was behind the billiard-room door—I saw you coax Mr. Julian Gray to come in. Confession loses all its horrors, and becomes quite a luxury with Mr. Julian Gray!"

"No more, Miss Roseberry! no more! For God's sake don't put me beside myself! You have tortured me enough already."

"You haven't been on the streets for nothing. You are a woman with resources. You know the value of having two strings to

tone. Grace listened with a hard smile of incredulity and a hard look of contempt.

"You are not far from the bell," she said; "ring it."

Mercy looked at her in speechless surprise.

"You are a perfect picture of repentance—you are dying to own the truth," pursued the other satirically. "Own it before everybody, and own it at once. Call in Lady Janet—call in Mr. Gray and Mr. Holmcroft—call in the servants. Go down on your knees and acknowledge yourself an impostor before them all. Then I will believe you—not before."

"Don't, don't turn me against you!" cried Mercy entreatingly.

"What do I care whether you are against me or not?"

"Don't—for 'your own' sake don't go on provoking me much longer!"

"For my own sake? You insolent creature! Do you mean to threaten me?"

With a last desperate effort her heart beating faster and faster, the blood burning hotter and hotter in her cheeks—Mercy still controlled herself.

"Have some compassion on me!" she

The mute endurance in her face additionally exasperated Grace Roseberry.

"*You* won't confess," she went on. "You have had a week to confess in, and you have not done it yet. No, no! you are of the sort that cheat and lie to the last. I am glad of it. I shall have the joy of exposing you, my self, before the whole house. I shall be the blessed means of casting you back on the streets. Oh! it will be almost worth all I have gone through, to see you with a police man's hand on your arm, and the mob pointing at you and mocking you on your way to gaol."

This time the sting struck deep; the outrage was beyond endurance. Mercy gave the woman who had again and again deliberately insulted her a first warning.

"Miss Roseberry," she said, "I have borne without a murmur the bitterest words you could say to me. Spare me any more insults. Indeed, indeed, I am eager to restore you to your just rights. With my whole heart I say it to you—I am resolved to confess everything!"

She spoke with trembling earnestness of

ferry. They will not be in my possession many hours longer."

"What do you mean?"

"However badly you may use me, it is my duty to undo the harm that I have done. I am bound to do you justice—I am determined to confess the truth."

Grace smiled scornfully.

"You confess!" she said. "Do you think I am fool enough to believe that? You are one shameful brazen lie from head to foot! Are *you* the woman to give up your silks and your jewels and your position in this house, and to go back to the Refuge of your own accord? Not you! not you!"

A first faint flush of colour showed itself, stealing slowly over Mercy's face; but she still held resolutely by the good influence which Julian had left behind him. She could still say to herself, "Anything rather than disappoint Julian Gray!" Sustained by the courage which *he* had called to life in her, she submitted to her martyrdom as bravely as ever. But there was an ominous change in her now: she could only submit because she could no longer trust herself.

hide like a thief, and wait like a beggar; and all for what? For the chance of having a word with *you*. Yes! you, madam, with the air of the Refuge and the dirt of the streets on you!"

Mercy's head sank lower; her hand trembled as it held by the back of the chair.

It was hard to bear the reiterated insults heaped on her, but Julian's influence still made itself felt. She answered as patiently as ever.

"If it is your pleasure to use hard words to me," she said, "I have no right to resent them."

"You have no right to anything!" Grace retorted. "You have no right to the gown on your back. Look at Yourself, and look at Me!" Her eyes travelled with a tigerish stare over Mercy's costly silk dress. "Who gave you that dress? who gave you those jewels? I know! Lady Janet gave them to Grace Roseberry. Are *you* Grace Roseberry? That dress is mine. Take off your [illegible] and your brooch. They were [illegible]ve."

[illegible]y soon have them, Miss Ro[illegible]e-

done which might give just cause of offence to Grace.

Lady Janet's course of action, on entering the dining-room, was in perfect harmony with Lady Janet's character.

Instantly discovering the intruder, she looked sharply at Mercy. "What did I tell you?" she asked. "Are you frightened? No! not in the least frightened! Well done, my dear!" She had recovered her temper: she took Mercy's hand as kindly as ever, and gave it a little friendly squeeze—then turned to the servant. "Wait in the library; I may want you again." She looked next at Julian. "Leave it all to me; I can manage it." She made a sign to Horace: "Stay where you are, and hold your tongue." Having now said all that was necessary to every one else, she advanced to the part of the room in which Grace was standing, with lowering brows and firmly-shut lips, defiant of everybody.

"I have no desire to offend you, or to act harshly towards you," her ladyship began, very quietly. "I only suggest that your visits to my house cannot possibly lead to any

satisfactory result. I hope you will not oblige me to make use of harder words than these—I hope you will understand that I wish you to withdraw."

The order of dismissal could hardly have been issued with more humane consideration for the supposed mental infirmity of the person to whom it was addressed. Grace instantly resisted it in the plainest possible terms.

"In justice to my father's memory, and in justice to myself," she answered, "I insist on a hearing. I refuse to withdraw." She deliberately took a chair and seated herself in the presence of the mistress of the house.

Lady Janet waited a moment—steadily controlling herself. In the interval of silence, Julian seized the opportunity of remonstrating with Grace.

"Is this what you promised me?" he asked gently. "You gave me your word that you would not return to Mablethorpe House."

Before he could say more, Lady Janet spoke again. She began her answer to Grace by pointing with a peremptory forefinger to the library door.

"If you have not made up your mind to take my advice by the time I have walked back to that door," she said, "I will put it out of your power to set me at defiance. I am used to be obeyed, and I will be obeyed. You force me to use hard words. I warn you, before it is too late. Go."

She returned slowly towards the library. Julian attempted to interfere with another word of remonstrance. His aunt stopped him by a gesture which said plainly, "I insist on acting for myself." He looked next at Mercy. Would she remain passive? Yes. She never lifted her head; she never moved from the place in which she was standing, apart from the rest. Horace himself tried to attract her attention, and tried in vain.

Arrived at the library door, Lady Janet looked over her shoulder at the little immovable black figure in the chair.

"Will you go?" she asked, for the last time.

Grace started up angrily from her seat, and fixed her viperish eyes on Mercy.

"I won't be turned out of your ladyship's house, in the presence of that impostor," she

said. "I may yield to force—but I will yield to nothing else. I insist on my right to the place that she has stolen from me. It's no use scolding me," she added, turning doggedly to Julian. "As long as that woman is here under my name, I can't and won't keep away from the house. I warn her, in your presence, that I have written to my friends in Canada! I dare her before you all to deny that she is the outcast and adventuress, Mercy Merrick!"

The challenge forced Mercy to take part in the proceedings, in her own defence. She had pledged herself to meet and defy Grace Roseberry on her own ground. She attempted to speak—Horace stopped her.

"You degrade yourself if you answer her," he said. "Take my arm, and let us leave the room."

"Yes! Take her out!" cried Grace. "She may well be ashamed to face an honest woman. It's her place to leave the room—not mine!"

Mercy drew her hand out of Horace's arm. "I decline to leave the room," she said quietly.

Horace still tried to persuade her to withdraw. "I can't bear to hear you insulted,"

he rejoined. "The woman offends me, though I know she is not responsible for what she says."

"Nobody's endurance will be tried much longer," said Lady Janet. She glanced at Julian, and, taking from her pocket the card which he had given to her, opened the library door.

"Go to the police station," she said to the servant in an undertone, "and give that card to the inspector on duty. Tell him there is not a moment to lose."

"Stop!" said Julian, before his aunt could close the door again.

"Stop?" repeated Lady Janet, sharply. "I have given the man his orders. What do you mean?"

"Before you send the card, I wish to say a word in private to this lady," replied Julian, indicating Grace. "When that is done," he continued, approaching Mercy, and pointedly addressing himself to her, "I shall have a request to make—I shall ask you to give me an opportunity of speaking to you without interruption."

His tone pointed the allusion. Mercy

shrank from looking at him. The signs of painful agitation began to show themselves in her shifting colour and her uneasy silence. Roused by Julian's significantly distant reference to what had passed between them, her better impulses were struggling already to recover their influence over her. She might, at that critical moment, have yielded to the promptings of her own nobler nature—she might have risen superior to the galling remembrance of the insults that had been heaped upon her—if Grace's malice had not seen in her hesitation a means of referring offensively once again to her interview with Julian Gray.

"Pray don't think twice about trusting him alone with me," she said, with a sardonic affectation of politeness. "*I* am not interested in making a conquest of Mr. Julian Gray."

The jealous distrust in Horace (already awakened by Julian's request) now attempted to assert itself openly. Before he could speak, Mercy's indignation had dictated Mercy's answer.

"I am much obliged to you, Mr. Gray," she said, addressing Julian (but still not raising her eyes to his). "I have nothing more

to say to you. There is no need for any further conversation between us."

In those rash words she recalled the confession to which she stood pledged. In those rash words she committed herself to keeping the position that she had usurped, in the face of the woman whom she had deprived of it!

Horace was silenced, but not satisfied. He saw Julian's eyes fixed in sad and searching attention on Mercy's face, while she was speaking. He heard Julian sigh to himself when she had done. He observed Julian—after a moment's serious consideration, and a moment's glance backward at the stranger in the poor black clothes—lift his head with the air of a man who had taken a sudden resolution.

"Bring me that card directly," he said to the servant. His tone announced that he was not to be trifled with. The man obeyed.

Without answering Lady Janet—who still peremptorily insisted on her right to act for herself—Julian took the pencil from his pocket-book, and added his signature to the writing already inscribed on the card. When

he had handed it back to the servant he made his apologies to his aunt.

"Pardon me for venturing to interfere," he said. "There is a serious reason for what I have done, which I will explain to you at a fitter time. In the meanwhile, I offer no further obstruction to the course which you propose taking. On the contrary, I have just assisted you in gaining the end that you have in view."

As he said that, he held up the pencil with which he had signed his name.

Lady Janet, naturally perplexed, and (with some reason perhaps) offended as well, made no answer. She waved her hand to the servant, and sent him away with the card.

There was silence in the room. The eyes of all the persons present turned more or less anxiously on Julian. Mercy was vaguely surprised and alarmed. Horace, like Lady Janet, felt offended, without clearly knowing why. Even Grace Roseberry herself was subdued by her own presentiment of some coming interference for which she was completely unprepared. Julian's words and actions, from the moment when he had written

on the card, were involved in a mystery to which not one of the persons round him held the clue.

The motive which had animated his conduct may, nevertheless, be described in two words: Julian still held to his faith in the inbred nobility of Mercy's nature.

He had inferred, with little difficulty, from the language which Grace had used towards Mercy in his presence, that the injured woman must have taken pitiless advantage of her position at the interview which he had interrupted. Instead of appealing to Mercy's sympathies and Mercy's sense of right—instead of accepting the expression of her sincere contrition, and encouraging her to make the completest and the speediest atonement—Grace had evidently outraged and insulted her. As a necessary result, her endurance had given way—under her own sense of intolerable severity and intolerable wrong.

The remedy for the mischief thus done was (as Julian had first seen it) to speak privately with Grace—to soothe her by owning that his opinion of the justice of her

claims had undergone a change in her favour —and then to persuade her, in her own interests, to let him carry to Mercy such expressions of apology and regret as might lead to a friendly understanding between them.

With those motives, he had made his request to be permitted to speak separately to the one and the other. The scene that had followed, the new insult offered by Grace, and the answer which it had wrung from Mercy, had convinced him that no such interference as he had contemplated would have the slightest prospect of success.

The one remedy now left to try was the desperate remedy of letting things take their course, and trusting implicitly to Mercy's better nature for the result.

Let her see the police officer in plain clothes enter the room. Let her understand clearly what the result of his interference would be. Let her confront the alternative of consigning Grace Roseberry to a madhouse, or of confessing the truth—and what would happen? If Julian's confidence in her was a confidence soundly placed, she would nobly pardon the outrages that had been

heaped upon her, and she would do justice to the woman whom she had wronged.

If, on the other hand, his belief in her was nothing better than the blind belief of an infatuated man—if she faced the alternative, and persisted in asserting her assumed identity, what then?

Julian's faith in Mercy refused to let that darker side of the question find a place in his thoughts. It rested entirely with him to bring the officer into the house. He had prevented Lady Janet from making any mischievous use of his card, by sending to the police-station, and warning them to attend to no message which they might receive unless the card produced bore his signature. Knowing the responsibility that he was taking on himself—knowing that Mercy had made no confession to him to which it was possible to appeal—he had signed his name without an instant's hesitation: and there he stood now, looking at the woman whose better nature he was determined to vindicate, the only calm person in the room.

Horace's jealousy saw something suspi-

ciously suggestive of a private understanding in Julian's earnest attention and in Mercy's downcast face. Having no excuse for open interference, he made an effort to part them.

"You spoke just now," he said to Julian, "of wishing to say a word in private to that person." (He pointed to Grace.) "Shall we retire, or will you take her into the library?"

"I refuse to have anything to say to him," Grace burst out, before Julian could answer. "I happen to know that he is the last person to do me justice. *He* has been effectually hoodwinked. If I speak to anybody privately, it ought to be to you. *You* have the greatest interest of any of them in finding out the truth."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you want to marry an outcast from the streets?"

Horace took one step forward towards her. There was a look in his face which plainly betrayed that he was capable of turning her out of the house with his own hands. Lady Janet stopped him.

"You were right in suggesting just now

that Grace had better leave the room," she said. "Let us all three go. Julian will remain here, and give the man his directions when he arrives. Come."

No. By a strange contradiction, it was Horace himself who now interfered to prevent Mercy from leaving the room. In the heat of his indignation, he lost all sense of his own dignity; he descended to the level of a woman whose intellect he believed to be deranged. To the surprise of every one present, he stepped back, and took from the table a jewel-case which he had placed there when he came into the room. It was the wedding present from his mother which he had brought to his betrothed wife. His outraged self-esteem seized the opportunity of vindicating Mercy by a public bestowal of the gift.

"Wait!" he called out sternly. "That wretch shall have her answer. She has sense enough to see, and sense enough to hear. Let her see and hear!"

He opened the jewel-case, and took from it a magnificent pearl necklace in an antique setting.

"Grace," he said, with his highest distinction of manner, "my mother sends you her love, and her congratulations on our approaching marriage. She begs you to accept, as part of your bridal dress, these pearls. She was married in them herself. They have been in our family for centuries. As one of the family, honoured and beloved, my mother offers them to my wife."

He lifted the necklace to clasp it round Mercy's neck.

Julian watched her in breathless suspense. Would she sustain the ordeal through which Horace had innocently condemned her to pass?

Yes! In the insolent presence of Grace Roseberry, what was there now that she could *not* sustain? Her pride was in arms. Her lovely eyes lighted up as only a woman's eyes *can* light up when they see jewelry. Her grand head bent gracefully to receive the necklace. Her face warmed into colour; her beauty rallied its charms. Her triumph over Grace Roseberry was complete! Julian's head sank. For one sad moment he secretly asked himself the question: "Have I been mistaken in her?"

Horace arrayed her in the pearls.

"Your husband puts these pearls on your neck, love," he said proudly, and paused to look at her. "Now," he added with a contemptuous backward glance at Grace, "we may go into the library. She has seen, and she has heard."

He believed that he had silenced her. He had simply furnished her sharp tongue with a new sting.

"*You* will hear, and *you* will see, when my proofs come from Canada," she retorted. "You will hear that your wife has stolen my name and my character! You will see your wife dismissed from this house!"

Mercy turned on her with an uncontrollable outburst of passion.

"You are mad!" she cried.

Lady Janet caught the electric infection of anger in the air of the room. She too turned on Grace. She too said it:

"You are mad!"

Horace followed Lady Janet. *He* was beside himself. *He* fixed his pitiless eyes on Grace, and echoed the contagious words:

"You are mad!"

She was silenced, she was daunted at last. The treble accusation revealed to her, for the first time, the frightful suspicion to which she had exposed herself. She shrank back, with a low cry of horror, and struck against a chair. She would have fallen if Julian had not sprung forward and caught her.

Lady Janet led the way to the library. She opened the door—started—and suddenly stepped aside, so as to leave the entrance free.

A man appeared in the open doorway.

He was not a gentleman; he was not a workman; he was not a servant. He was vilely dressed, in glossy black broadcloth. His frock coat hung on him instead of fitting him. His waistcoat was too short and too tight over the chest. His trousers were a pair of shapeless black bags. His gloves were too large for him. His highly-polished boots creaked detestably whenever he moved. He had odiously watchful eyes—eyes that looked skilled in peeping through keyholes. His large ears, set forward like the ears of a monkey, pleaded guilty to meanly listening behind other people's doors. His manner

was quietly confidential, when he spoke: impenetrably self-possessed, when he was silent. A lurking air of secret-service enveloped the fellow, like an atmosphere of his own, from head to foot. He looked all round the magnificent room, without betraying either surprise or admiration. He closely investigated every person in it with one glance of his cunningly-watchful eyes. Making his bow to Lady Janet, he silently showed her, as his introduction, the card that had summoned him. And then he stood at ease, self-revealed in his own sinister identity—a police officer in plain clothes.

Nobody spoke to him. Everybody shrank inwardly, as if a reptile had crawled into the room.

He looked backwards and forwards, perfectly unembarrassed, between Julian and Horace.

"Is Mr. Julian Gray here?" he asked.

Julian led Grace to a seat. Her eyes were fixed on the man. She trembled—she whispered, "Who is he?" Julian spoke to the police officer without answering her.

"Wait there," he said, pointing to a chair

in the most distant corner of the room. "I will speak to you directly."

The man advanced to the chair, marching to the discord of his creaking boots. He privately valued the carpet, at so much a yard, as he walked over it. He privately valued the chair, at so much the dozen, as he sat down on it. He was quite at his ease: it was no matter to him, whether he waited and did nothing, or whether he pried into the private character of every one in the room, as long as he was paid for it.

Even Lady Janet's resolution to act for herself was not proof against the appearance of the policeman in plain clothes. She left it to her nephew to take the lead. Julian glanced at Mercy before he stirred further in the matter. He knew that the end rested now, not with him, but with her.

She felt his eye on her, while her own eyes were looking at the man. She turned her head—hesitated—and suddenly approached Julian. Like Grace Roseberry, she was trembling. Like Grace Roseberry, she whispered, "Who is he?"

Julian told her plainly who he was.

"Why is he here?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No!"

Horace left Lady Janet, and joined Mercy and Julian—impatient of the private colloquy between them.

"Am I in the way?" he inquired.

Julian drew back a little, understanding Horace perfectly. He looked round at Grace. Nearly the whole length of the spacious room divided them from the place in which she was sitting. She had never moved since he had placed her in a chair. The direst of all terrors was in possession of her—terror of the unknown. There was no fear of her interfering; and no fear of her hearing what they said, so long as they were careful to speak in guarded tones. Julian set the example by lowering his voice.

"Ask Horace why the police officer is here," he said to Mercy.

She put the question directly. "Why is he here?"

Horace looked across the room at Grace, and answered, "He is here to relieve us of that woman."

"Do you mean that he will take her away?"

"Yes."

"Where will he take her to?"

"To the police station."

Mercy started, and looked at Julian. He was still watching the slightest changes in her face. She looked back again at Horace.

"To the police station!" she repeated. "What for?"

"How can you ask the question?" said Horace irritably. "To be placed under restraint, of course."

"Do you mean a prison?"

"I mean an asylum."

Again Mercy turned to Julian. There was horror now, as well as surprise, in her face. "Oh!" she said to him, "Horace is surely wrong? It can't be?"

Julian left it to Horace to answer. Every faculty in him seemed to be still absorbed in watching Mercy's face. She was compelled to address herself to Horace once more.

"What sort of asylum?" she asked. "You don't surely mean a madhouse?"

"I do," he rejoined. "The workhouse

first, perhaps — and then the madhouse. What is there to surprise you in that? You yourself told her to her face she was mad. Good heavens! how pale you are! What is the matter?"

She turned to Julian for the third time. The terrible alternative that was offered to her had showed itself at last, without reserve or disguise. Restore the identity that you have stolen, or shut her up in a madhouse— it rests with you to choose! In that form the situation shaped itself in her mind. She chose on the instant. Before she opened her lips, the higher nature in her spoke to Julian, in her eyes. The steady inner light that he had seen in them once already, shone in them again, brighter and purer than before. The conscience that he had fortified, the soul that he had saved, looked at him, and said, Doubt us no more!

"Send that man out of the house."

Those were her first words. She spoke (pointing to the police officer) in clear, ringing, resolute tones, audible in the remotest corner of the room.

Julian's hand stole unobserved to hers, and

told her, in its momentary pressure, to count on his brotherly sympathy and help. All the other persons in the room looked at her in speechless surprise. Grace rose from her chair. Even the man in plain clothes started to his feet. Lady Janet (hurriedly joining Horace, and fully sharing his perplexity and alarm,) took Mercy impulsively by the arm, and shook it, as if to rouse her to a sense of what she was doing. Mercy held firm; Mercy resolutely repeated what she had said: "Send that man out of the house."

Lady Janet lost all patience with her. "What has come to you?" she asked sternly. "Do you know what you are saying? The man is here in your interest, as well as in mine; the man is here to spare you, as well as me, further annoyance and insult. And you insist—insist, in my presence—on his being sent away! What does it mean?"

"You shall know what it means, Lady Janet, in half an hour. I don't insist—I only reiterate my entreaty. Let the man be sent away!"

Julian stepped aside (with his aunt's eyes angrily following him) and spoke to the police

officer. "Go back to the station," he said, "and wait there till you hear from me."

The meanly-vigilant eyes of the man in plain clothes travelled sidelong from Julian to Mercy, and valued her beauty as they had valued the carpet and the chairs. "The old story," he thought. "The nice-looking woman is always at the bottom of it; and, sooner or later, the nice-looking woman has her way." He marched back across the room, to the discord of his own creaking boots; bowed, with a villainous smile which put the worst construction upon everything; and vanished through the library door.

Lady Janet's high breeding restrained her from saying anything until the police officer was out of hearing. Then, and not till then, she appealed to Julian.

"I presume you are in the secret of this?" she said. "I suppose you have some reason for setting my authority at defiance in my own house?"

"I have never yet failed to respect your ladyship," Julian answered. "Before long you will know that I am not failing in respect towards you now."

Lady Janet looked across the room. Grace was listening eagerly, conscious that events had taken some mysterious turn in her favour within the last minute.

"Is it part of your new arrangement of my affairs," her ladyship continued, "that this person is to remain in the house?"

The terror that had daunted Grace had not lost all hold of her yet. She left it to Julian to reply. Before he could speak, Mercy crossed the room and whispered to her, "Give me time to confess it in writing. I can't own it before them—with this round my neck." She pointed to the necklace. Grace cast a threatening glance at her, and suddenly looked away again in silence.

Mercy answered Lady Janet's question. "I beg your ladyship to permit her to remain until the half hour is over," she said. "My request will have explained itself by that time."

Lady Janet raised no further obstacles. Something in Mercy's face, or in Mercy's tone, seemed to have silenced her, as it had silenced Grace. Horace was the next who spoke. In tones of suppressed rage and sus-

picion, he addressed himself to Mercy, standing fronting him by Julian's side.

"Am I included," he asked, "in the arrangement which engages you to explain your extraordinary conduct in half an hour?"

His hand had placed his mother's wedding-present round Mercy's neck. A sharp pang wrung her as she looked at Horace, and saw how de[illegible] had already distressed and offende[illegible] The tears rose in her eyes; she hum[illegible]aintly answered him.

"If yo[illegible]se," was all she could say, before[illegible]l swelling at her heart rose and silenc[illegible]

H[illegible] sense of injury refused to be soothe[illegible] such simple submission as this.

"I[illegible]e mysteries and innuendoes," he went o[illegible]arshly. "In my family circle we are accustomed to meet each other frankly. Why am I to wait half an hour for an explanation which might be given now? What am I to wait for?"

Lady Janet recovered herself as Horace spoke.

"I entirely agree with you," she said. "I ask too, what are we to wait for?"

Even Julian's self-possession failed him when his aunt repeated that cruelly plain question. How would Mercy answer it? Would her courage still hold out?

"You have asked me what you are to wait for," she said to Horace, quietly and firmly. "Wait to hear something more of Mercy Merrick."

Lady Janet listened with [redacted] weary disgust.

"Don't return to *that!*" [redacted]. "We know enough about Mercy [redacted] already."

"Pardon me—your ladyship [redacted] know. I am the only person who can [redacted] ou."

"You?"

She bent her head respectfully.

"I have begged you, Lady Ja[redacted] give me half an hour," she went on. "[redacted]alf an hour I solemnly engage myself to produce Mercy Merrick in this room. Lady Janet Roy, Mr. Horace Holmcroft, you are to wait for that."

Steadily pledging herself in those terms to make her confession, she unclasped the pearls from her neck, put them away in their case, and placed it in Horace's hand. "Keep it,"

she said, with a momentary faltering in her voice, "until we meet again."

Horace took the case in silence; he looked and acted like a man whose mind was paralysed by surprise. His hand moved mechanically. His eyes followed Mercy with a vacant questioning look. Lady Janet seemed, in her different way, to share the strange oppression that had fallen on him. A marked change had appeared in her since Mercy had spoken last.

"Have I your ladyship's leave," said Mercy, respectfully, "to go to my room?"

Lady Janet mutely granted the request. Mercy's last look, before she went out, was a look at Grace. "Are you satisfied now?" the grand grey eyes seemed to say mournfully. Grace turned her head aside, with a quick petulant action. Even her narrow nature opened for a moment unwillingly, and let pity in a little way, in spite of itself.

Mercy's parting words recommended Grace to Julian's care:

"You will see that she is allowed a room to wait in? You will warn her yourself when the half hour has expired?"

Julian opened the library door for her.

"Well done! Nobly done!" he whispered. "All my sympathy is with you—all my help is yours."

Her eyes looked at him, and thanked him, through her gathering tears. His own eyes were dimmed. She passed quietly down the room, and was lost to him before he had shut the door again.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIRST

THE FOOTSTEP IN THE CORRIDOR.

MERCY was alone.

She had secured one half-hour of retirement in her own room; designing to devote that interval to the writing of her confession in the form of a letter addressed to Julian Gray.

No recent change in her position had, as yet, mitigated her horror of acknowledging to Horace and to Lady Janet that she had won her way to their hearts in disguise. Through Julian only could she say the words which were to establish Grace Roseberry in her right position in the house.

How was her confession to be addressed to him? In writing? or by word of mouth?

After all that had happened, from the time

when Lady Janet's appearance had interrupted them, she would have felt relief rather than embarrassment in personally opening her heart to the man who had so delicately understood her, who had so faithfully befriended her in her sorest need. But the repeated betrayals of Horace's jealous suspicion of Julian warned her that she would only be surrounding herself with new difficulties, and be placing Julian in a position of painful embarrassment, if she admitted him to a private interview while Horace was in the house.

The one course left to take was the course that she had adopted. Determining to address the narrative of the Fraud to Julian in the form of a letter, she arranged to add, at the close, certain instructions, pointing out to him the line of conduct which she wished him to pursue.

These instructions contemplated the communication of her letter to Lady Janet and to Horace, in the library, while Mercy—self-confessed as the missing woman whom she had pledged herself to produce—awaited in the adjoining room whatever sentence it pleased them to pronounce on her. Her resolution

not to screen herself behind Julian from any consequences which might follow the confession, had taken root in her mind from the moment when Horace had harshly asked her (and when Lady Janet had joined him in asking) why she delayed her explanation, and what she was keeping them waiting for. Out of the very pain which those questions inflicted, the idea of waiting her sentence in her own person, in one room, while her letter to Julian was speaking for her in another, had sprung to life. "Let them break my heart if they like," she had thought to herself in the self-abasement of that bitter moment; "it will be no more than I have deserved."

She locked her door and opened her writing-desk. Knowing what she had to do, she tried to collect herself and do it.

The effort was in vain. Those persons who study writing as an art are probably the only persons who can measure the vast distance which separates a conception as it exists in the mind from the reduction of that conception to form and shape in words. The

heavy stress of agitation that had been laid on Mercy for hours together, had utterly unfitted her for the delicate and difficult process of arranging the events of a narrative in their due sequence and their due proportion towards each other. Again and again she tried to begin her letter, and again and again she was baffled by the same hopeless confusion of ideas. She gave up the struggle in despair.

A sense of sinking at her heart, a weight of hysterical oppression on her bosom, warned her not to leave herself unoccupied—a prey to morbid self-investigation and imaginary alarms.

She turned instinctively, for a temporary employment of some kind, to the consideration of her own future. Here there were no intricacies or entanglements. The prospect began and ended with her return to the Refuge, if the matron would receive her. She did no injustice to Julian Gray; that great heart would feel for her, that kind hand would be held out to her, she knew. But what would happen if she thoughtlessly accepted all that his sympathy might offer? Scandal would point to her beauty and to

his youth, and would place its own vile interpretation on the purest friendship that could exist between them. And *he* would be the sufferer, for *he* had a character—a clergyman's character—to lose. No! for his sake, out of gratitude to *him*, the farewell to Mablethorpe House must be also the farewell to Julian Gray.

The precious minutes were passing. She resolved to write to the matron, and ask if she might hope to be forgiven and employed at the Refuge again. Occupation over the letter that was easy to write might have its fortifying effect on her mind, and might pave the way for resuming the letter that was hard to write. She waited a moment at the window, thinking of the past life to which she was soon to return, before she took up the pen again.

Her window looked eastward. The dusky glare of lighted London met her as her eyes rested on the sky. It seemed to beckon her back to the horror of the cruel streets—to point her way mockingly to the bridges over the black river—to lure her to the top of the parapet, and the dreadful leap into God's

arms, or into annihilation — who knew which?

She turned, shuddering, from the window. "Will it end in that way," she asked herself, "if the matron says No?"

She began her letter.

"DEAR MADAM,—So long a time has passed since you heard from me, that I almost shrink from writing to you. I am afraid you have already given me up in your own mind as a hard-hearted, ungrateful woman.

"I have been leading a false life; I have not been fit to write to you before to-day. Now, when I am doing what I can to atone to those whom I have injured—now, when I repent with my whole heart—may I ask leave to return to the friend who has borne with me and helped me through many miserable years? Oh, madam, do not cast me off! I have no one to turn to but you.

"Will you let me own everything to you? Will you forgive me when you know what I have done? Will you take me back into the Refuge, if you have any employment for me by which I may earn my shelter and my bread?

"Before the night comes I must leave the house from which I am now writing. I have nowhere to go to. The little money, the few valuable possessions I have, must be left behind me: they have been obtained under false pretences; they are not mine. No more forlorn creature than I am lives at this moment. You are a Christian woman. Not for my sake—for Christ's sake, pity me and take me back.

"I am a good nurse, as you know, and I am a quick worker with my needle. In one way or the other, can you not find occupation for me?

"I could also teach, in a very unpretending way. But that is useless. Who would trust their children to a woman without a character? There is no hope for me in this direction. And yet I am so fond of children! I think I could be—not happy again, perhaps, but content with my lot, if I could be associated with them in some way. Are there not charitable societies which are trying to help and protect destitute children wandering about the streets? I think of my own wretched childhood—and oh! I should so

like to be employed in saving other children from ending as I have ended. I could work, for such an object as that, from morning to night, and never feel weary. All my heart would be in it; and I should have this advantage over happy and prosperous women —I should have nothing else to think of. Surely, they might trust me with the poor little starving wanderers of the streets—if you said a word for me? If I am asking too much, please forgive me. I am so wretched, madam—so lonely and so weary of my life.

"There is only one thing more. My time here is very short. Will you please reply to this letter (to say yes or no) by telegram?

"The name by which you know me is not the name by which I have been known here. I must beg you to address the telegram to 'The Rev. Julian Gray, Mablethorpe House, Kensington.' He is here, and he will show it to me. No words of mine can describe what I owe to him. He has never despaired of me—he has saved me from myself. God bless and reward the kindest, truest, best man I have ever known!

"I have no more to say, except to ask you

to excuse this long letter, and to believe me your grateful servant, ———"

She signed and enclosed the letter, and wrote the address. Then, for the first time, an obstacle which she ought to have seen before showed itself, standing straight in her way.

There was no time to forward her letter in the ordinary manner by post. It must be taken to its destination by a private messenger. Lady Janet's servants had, hitherto, been, one and all, at her disposal. Could she presume to employ them on her own affairs, when she might be dismissed from the house, a disgraced woman, in half an hour's time? Of the two alternatives, it seemed better to take her chance, and present herself at the Refuge, without asking leave first.

While she was still considering the question, she was startled by a knock at her door. On opening it, she admitted Lady Janet's maid with a morsel of folded note paper in her hand.

"From my lady, miss," said the woman, giving her the note. "There is no answer."

Mercy stopped her, as she was about to leave the room. The appearance of the maid suggested an inquiry to her. She asked if any of the servants were likely to be going into town that afternoon?

"Yes, miss. One of the grooms is going on horseback, with a message to her ladyship's coachmaker."

The Refuge was close by the coachmaker's place of business. Under the circumstances, Mercy was emboldened to make use of the man. It was a pardonable liberty to employ his services now.

"Will you kindly give the groom that letter for me?" she said. "It will not take him out of his way. He has only to deliver it—nothing more."

The woman willingly complied with the request. Left once more by herself, Mercy looked at the little note which had been placed in her hands.

It was the first time that her benefactress had employed this formal method of communicating with her when they were both in the house. What did such a departure from established habits mean? Had she received

her notice of dismissal? Had Lady Janet's quick intelligence found its way already to a suspicion of the truth? Mercy's nerves were unstrung. She trembled pitiably as she opened the folded note.

It began without a form of address, and it ended without a signature. Thus it ran:

"I must request you to delay for a little while the explanation which you have promised me. At my age, painful surprises are very trying things. I must have time to compose myself, before I can hear what you have to say. You shall not be kept waiting longer than I can help. In the meanwhile, everything will go on as usual. My nephew, Julian, and Horace Holmcroft, and the lady whom I found in the dining-room, will, by my desire, remain in the house until I am able to meet them, and to meet you, again."

There the note ended. To what conclusion did it point?

Had Lady Janet really guessed the truth? or had she only surmised that her adopted daughter was connected in some discreditable manner with the mystery of "Mercy Merrick?" The line in which she referred to

the intruder in the dining-room as "the lady," showed very remarkably that her opinions had undergone a change in that quarter. But was the phrase enough of itself to justify the inference that she had actually anticipated the nature of Mercy's confession? It was not easy to decide that doubt at the moment—and it proved to be equally difficult to throw any light on it at an after time. To the end of her life, Lady Janet resolutely refused to communicate to any one the conclusions which she might have privately formed, the griefs which she might have secretly stifled, on that memorable day.

Amid much, however, which was beset with uncertainty, one thing at least was clear. The time at Mercy's disposal in her own room, had been indefinitely prolonged by Mercy's benefactress. Hours might pass before the disclosure to which she stood committed, would be expected from her. In those hours she might surely compose her mind sufficiently to be able to write her letter of confession to Julian Gray.

Standing near her glass, as these thoughts occurred to her, she noticed the reflection of

herself still arrayed in the rich dress, still wearing the jewels which Lady Janet had given to her.

She shuddered as the remembrance of what Grace Roseberry had said recurred to her mind. The plain dress in which she had entered Mablethorpe House, still hung in a dark corner of her wardrobe. She put her jewels back in the casket, and dressed herself in the plain black gown. "I shall take nothing away with me," she thought, as she looked her last at the wardrobe and the jewels. "Miss Roseberry will find all her presents here when she takes possession of this room."

She seated herself again at the table—bent on making another attempt to write her letter to Julian. Resting her head on her hand, she tried to trace her way through the labyrinth of the past, beginning with the day when she had met Grace Roseberry in the French cottage, and ending with the day which had brought them face to face, for the second time, in the dining-room at Mablethorpe House.

The chain of events began to unroll itself in her mind clearly, link by link.

She remarked, as she pursued the retrospect, how strangely Chance or Fate had paved the way for the act of personation, in the first place. She had met with Grace Roseberry under those extraordinary circumstances of common trial and common peril, in a strange country, which would especially predispose two women of the same nation to open their hearts to each other. In no other way could she have obtained, at a first interview, that fatal knowledge of Grace's position and Grace's affairs which had placed temptation before her, as the necessary consequence that followed the bursting of the German shell.

Advancing from this point, through the succeeding series of events which had so naturally, and yet so strangely, favoured the perpetration of the fraud, Mercy reached the later period when Grace had followed her to England. Here again, she remarked, in the second place, how Chance or Fate had once more paved the way for that second meeting which had confronted them with one another at Mablethorpe House.

She had, as she well remembered, attended

at a certain assembly (convened by a charitable society) in the character of Lady Janet's representative, at Lady Janet's own request. For that reason, she had been absent from the house when Grace had entered it. If her return had been delayed by a few minutes only, Julian would have had time to remove Grace from the room; and the terrible meeting which had stretched Mercy senseless on the floor would never have taken place. As the event had happened, the persons assembled at the society's rooms had disagreed so seriously on the business which had brought them together, as to render it necessary to take the ordinary course of adjourning the proceedings to a future day. And Chance, or Fate, had so timed that adjournment as to bring Mercy back into the dining-room exactly at the moment when Grace Roseberry insisted on being confronted with the woman who had taken her place!

She had never yet seen the circumstances in this sinister light. She was alone, at a crisis in her life. She was worn and weakened by contending emotions which had shaken her to the soul.

Little by little, she felt the enervating influences let loose on her, in her lonely position, by her new train of thought. Little by little, her heart began to sink under the stealthy chill of superstitious dread. Vaguely horrible presentiments throbbed in her with her pulses, flowed through her with her blood. Mystic oppressions of hidden disaster hovered over her in the atmosphere of the room. The cheerful candlelight turned traitor to her and grew dim. Supernatural murmurs trembled round the house in the moaning of the winter wind. She was afraid to look behind her. On a sudden, she felt her own cold hands covering her face, without knowing when she had lifted them to it, or why.

Still helpless under the horror that held her, she suddenly heard footsteps—a man's footsteps—in the corridor outside. At other times the sound would have startled her: now, it broke the spell. The footsteps suggested life, companionship, human interposition—no matter of what sort. She mechanically took up her pen; she found herself beginning to remember her letter to Julian Gray.

At the same moment the footsteps stopped outside her door. The man knocked.

She still felt shaken. She was hardly mistress of herself yet. A faint cry of alarm escaped her at the sound of the knock. Before it could be repeated she had rallied her courage, and had opened the door.

The man in the corridor was Horace Holmcroft.

His ruddy complexion had turned pale. His hair (of which he was especially careful at other times) was in disorder. The superficial polish of his manner was gone; the undisguised man, sullen, distrustful, irritated to the last degree of endurance, showed through. He looked at her with a watchfully-suspicious eye; he spoke to her without preface or apology, in a coldly angry voice:

"Are you aware," he asked, "of what is going on downstairs?"

"I have not left my room," she answered. "I know that Lady Janet has deferred the explanation which I had promised to give her, and I know no more."

"Has nobody told you what Lady Janet did after you left us? Has nobody told you

that she politely placed her own boudoir at the disposal of the very woman whom she had ordered half an hour before to leave the house? Do you really not know that Mr. Julian Gray has himself conducted this suddenly-honoured guest to her place of retirement? and that I am left alone in the midst of these changes, contradictions, and mysteries—the only person who is kept out in the dark?"

"It is surely needless to ask me these questions," said Mercy, gently. "Who could possibly have told me what was going on below stairs, before you knocked at my door?"

He looked at her with an ironical affectation of surprise.

"You are strangely forgetful to-day," he said. "Surely your friend Mr. Julian Gray might have told you? I am astonished to hear that he has not had his private interview yet."

"I don't understand you, Horace."

"I don't want you to understand me," he retorted irritably. "The proper person to understand me is Julian Gray. I look to

him to account to me for the confidential relations which seem to have been established between you behind my back. He has avoided me thus far, but I shall find my way to him yet."

His manner threatened more than his words expressed. In Mercy's nervous condition at the moment, it suggested to her that he might attempt to fasten a quarrel on Julian Gray.

"You are entirely mistaken," she said warmly. "You are ungratefully doubting your best and truest friend. I say nothing of myself. You will soon discover why I patiently submit to suspicions which other women would resent as an insult."

"Let me discover it at once. Now! Without wasting a moment more!"

There had hitherto been some little distance between them. Mercy had listened, waiting on the threshold of her door; Horace had spoken, standing against the opposite wall of the corridor. When he said his last words, he suddenly stepped forward, and (with something imperative in the gesture) laid his hand on her arm. The strong grasp

of it almost hurt her. She struggled to release herself.

"Let me go!" she said. "What do you mean?"

He dropped her arm as suddenly as he had taken it.

"You shall know what I mean," he replied. "A woman who has grossly outraged and insulted you—whose only excuse is that she is mad—is detained in the house at your desire, I might almost say at your command, when the police-officer is waiting to take her away. I have a right to know what this means. I am engaged to marry you. If you won't trust other people, you are bound to explain yourself to Me. I refuse to wait for Lady Janet's convenience. I insist (if you force me to say so)—I insist on knowing the real nature of your connection with this affair. You have obliged me to follow you here; it is my only opportunity of speaking to you. You avoid me; you shut yourself up from me in your own room. I am not your husband yet—I have no right to follow you in. But there are other rooms open to us. The library is at our disposal, and I will

take care that we are not interrupted. I am now going there, and I have a last question to ask. You are to be my wife in a week's time; will you take me into your confidence or not?"

To hesitate was, in this case, literally to be lost. Mercy's sense of justice told her that Horace had claimed no more than his due. She answered instantly.

"I will follow you to the library, Horace, in five minutes."

Her prompt and frank compliance with his wishes surprised and touched him. He took her hand.

She had endured all that his angry sense of injury could say. His gratitude wounded her to the quick. The bitterest moment she had felt yet was the moment in which he raised her hand to his lips, and murmured tenderly, "My own true Grace!" She could only sign to him to leave her, and hurry back into her own room.

Her first feeling, when she found herself alone again, was wonder—wonder that it should never have occurred to her, until he had himself suggested it, that her betrothed

husband had the foremost right to her confession. Her horror of owning to either of them that she had cheated them out of their love, had hitherto placed Horace and Lady Janet on the same level. She now saw for the first time, that there was no comparison between the claims which they respectively had on her. She owed an allegiance to Horace, to which Lady Janet could assert no right. Cost her what it might to avow the truth to him with her own lips, the cruel sacrifice must be made.

Without a moment's hesitation, she put away her writing materials. It amazed her that she should ever have thought of using Julian Gray as an interpreter between the man to whom she was betrothed and herself. Julian's sympathy (she thought) must have made a strong impression on her indeed, to blind her to a duty which was beyond all compromise, which admitted of no dispute!

She had asked for five minutes of delay before she followed Horace. It was too long a time.

Her one chance of finding courage to crush him with the dreadful revelation of

what she had really done, was to plunge headlong into the disclosure without giving herself time to think. The shame of it would inevitably overpower her if she gave herself time to think.

She turned to the door to follow him at once.

Even at that trying moment, the most ineradicable of all a woman's instincts—the instinct of personal self-respect—brought her to a pause. She had passed through more than one terrible trial since she had dressed to go downstairs. Remembering this, she stopped mechanically, retraced her steps, and looked at herself in the glass.

There was no motive of vanity in what she now did. The action was as unconscious as if she had buttoned an unfastened glove, or shaken out a crumpled dress. Not the faintest idea crossed her mind of looking to see if her beauty might still plead for her, and of trying to set it off at its best.

A momentary smile, the most weary, the most hopeless that ever saddened a woman's face, appeared in the reflection which her mirror gave her back. "Haggard, ghastly,

old before my time!" she said to herself. "Well! better so. He will feel it less—he will not regret me."

With that thought she went downstairs to meet him in the library.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SECOND.

THE MAN IN THE DINING-ROOM.

IN the great emergencies of life we feel, or we act, as our dispositions incline us. But we never think. Mercy's mind was a blank as she descended the stairs. On her way down, she was conscious of nothing but the one headlong impulse to get to the library in the shortest possible space of time. Arrived at the door, the impulse capriciously left her. She stopped on the mat, wondering why she had hurried herself, with time to spare. Her heart sank; the fever of her excitement changed suddenly to a chill, as she faced the closed door, and asked herself the question, Dare I go in?

Her own hand answered her. She lifted it to turn the handle of the lock. It dropped again helplessly at her side.

The sense of her own irresolution wrung from her a low exclamation of despair. Faint as it was, it had apparently not passed unheard. The door was opened from within —and Horace stood before her.

He drew aside to let her pass into the room. But he never followed her in. He stood in the doorway, and spoke to her, keeping the door open with his hand.

"Do you mind waiting here for me?" he asked.

She looked at him, in vacant surprise, doubting whether she had heard him aright.

"It will not be for long," he went on. "I am far too anxious to hear what you have to tell me to submit to any needless delays. The truth is, I have had a message from Lady Janet."

(From Lady Janet! What could Lady Janet want with him, at a time when she was bent on composing herself in the retirement of her own room?)

"I ought to have said two messages,"

Horace proceeded. "The first was given to me on my way downstairs. Lady Janet wished to see me immediately. I sent an excuse. A second message followed. Lady Janet would accept no excuse. If I refused to go to her I should be merely obliging her to come to me. It is impossible to risk being interrupted in that way; my only alternative is to get the thing over as soon as possible. Do you mind waiting?"

"Certainly not. Have you any idea of what Lady Janet wants with you?"

"No. Whatever it is, she shall not keep me long away from you. You will be quite alone here; I have warned the servants not to show any one in." With those words, he left her.

Mercy's first sensation was a sensation of relief—soon lost in a feeling of shame at the weakness which could welcome any temporary relief in such a position as hers. The emotion thus roused, merged, in its turn, into a sense of impatient regret. "But for Lady Janet's message," she thought to herself, "I might have known my fate by this time!"

The slow minutes followed each other

drearily. She paced to and fro in the library, faster and faster, under the intolerable irritation, the maddening uncertainty, of her own suspense. Ere long, even the spacious room seemed to be too small for her. The sober monotony of the long book-lined shelves oppressed and offended her. She threw open the door which led into the dining-room, and dashed in, eager for a change of objects, athirst for more space and more air.

At the first step, she checked herself; rooted to the spot, under a sudden revulsion of feeling which quieted her in an instant.

The room was only illuminated by the waning firelight. A man was obscurely visible seated on the sofa, with his elbows on his knees and his head resting on his hands. He looked up, as the open door let in the light from the library lamps. The mellow glow reached his face, and revealed Julian Gray.

Mercy was standing with her back to the light; her face being necessarily hidden in deep shadow. He recognised her by her figure, and by the attitude into which it unconsciously fell. That unsought grace, that lithe long beauty of line, belonged to but one

woman in the house. He rose, and approached her.

"I have been wishing to see you," he said, "and hoping that accident might bring about some such meeting as this."

He offered her a chair. Mercy hesitated before she took her seat. This was their first meeting alone, since Lady Janet had interrupted her at the moment when she was about to confide to Julian the melancholy story of the past. Was he anxious to seize the opportunity of returning to her confession? The terms in which he had addressed her seemed to imply it. She put the question to him in plain words.

"I feel the deepest interest in hearing all that you have still to confide to me," he answered. "But anxious as I may be, I will not hurry you. I will wait, if you wish it."

"I am afraid I must own that I do wish it," Mercy rejoined. "Not on my account—but because my time is at the disposal of Horace Holmcroft. I expect to see him in a few minutes."

"Could you give me those few minutes?"

Julian asked. "I have something, on my side, to say to you, which I think you ought to know, before you see any one—Horace himself included."

He spoke with a certain depression of tone which was not associated with her previous experience of him. His face looked prematurely old and care-worn, in the red light of the fire. Something had plainly happened to sadden and to disappoint him, since they had last met.

"I willingly offer you all the time that I have at my own command," Mercy replied. "Does what you have to tell me relate to Lady Janet?"

He gave her no direct reply. "What I have to tell you of Lady Janet," he said gravely, "is soon told. So far as she is concerned, you have nothing more to dread. Lady Janet knows all."

Even the heavy weight of oppression caused by the impending interview with Horace failed to hold its place in Mercy's mind, when Julian answered her in those words.

"Come into the lighted room," she said

faintly. "It is too terrible to hear you say that in the dark."

Julian followed her into the library. Her limbs trembled under her. She dropped into a chair, and shrank under his great bright eyes, as he stood by her side, looking sadly down on her.

"Lady Janet knows all!" she repeated, with her head on her breast, and the tears falling slowly over her cheeks. "Have you told her?"

"I have said nothing to Lady Janet or to any one. Your confidence is a sacred confidence to me, until you have spoken first."

"Has Lady Janet said anything to you?"

"Not a word. She has looked at you with the vigilant eyes of love; she has listened to you with the quick hearing of love—and she has found her own way to the truth. She will not speak of it to me—she will not speak of it to any living creature. I only know now how dearly she loved you. In spite of herself she clings to you still. Her life, poor soul, has been a barren one; unworthy, miserably unworthy, of such a nature as hers. Her marriage was loveless and childless.

She has had admirers, but never, in the higher sense of the word, a friend. All the best years of her life have been wasted in the unsatisfied longing for something to love. At the end of her life You have filled the void. Her heart has found its youth again, through You. At her age—at any age—is such a tie as this to be rudely broken at the mere bidding of circumstances? No! She will suffer anything, risk anything, forgive anything, rather than own, even to herself, that she has been deceived in you. There is more than her happiness at stake; there is pride, a noble pride, in such love as hers, which will ignore the plainest discovery and deny the most unanswerable truth. I am firmly convinced—from my own knowledge of her character, and from what I have observed in her to-day—that she will find some excuse for refusing to hear your confession. And more than that, I believe (if the exertion of her influence can do it), that she will leave no means untried of preventing you from acknowledging your true position here to any living creature. I take a serious responsibility on myself in telling you this—

and I don't shrink from it. You ought to know, and you shall know, what trials and what temptations may yet lie before you."

He paused—leaving Mercy time to compose herself, if she wished to speak to him.

She felt that there was a necessity for her speaking to him. He was plainly not aware that Lady Janet had already written to her to defer her promised explanation. This circumstance was in itself a confirmation of the opinion which he had expressed. She ought to mention it to him; she tried to mention it to him. But she was not equal to the effort. The few simple words in which he had touched on the tie that bound Lady Janet to her, had wrung her heart. Her tears choked her. She could only sign to him to go on.

"You may wonder at my speaking so positively," he continued, "with nothing better than my own conviction to justify me. I can only say that I have watched Lady Janet too closely to feel any doubt. I saw the moment in which the truth flashed on her, as plainly as I now see you. It did not disclose itself gradually—it burst on her, as it burst on me.

She suspected nothing—she was frankly indignant at your sudden interference and your strange language—until the time came in which you pledged yourself to produce Mercy Merrick. Then (and then only) the truth broke on her mind; trebly revealed to her in your words, your voice, and your look. Then (and then only) I saw a marked change come over her, and remain in her while she remained in the room. I dread to think of what she may do in the first reckless despair of the discovery that she has made. I distrust—though God knows I am not naturally a suspicious man—the most apparently trifling events that are now taking place about us. You have held nobly to your resolution to own the truth. Prepare yourself, before the evening is over, to be tried and tempted again."

Mercy lifted her head. Fear took the place of grief in her eyes, as they rested in startled inquiry on Julian's face.

"How is it possible that temptation can come to me now?" she asked.

"I will leave it to events to answer that question," he said. "You will not have long

to wait. In the meantime I have put you on your guard." He stooped, and spoke his next words earnestly, close at her ear. "Hold fast by the admirable courage which you have shown thus far," he went on. "Suffer anything, rather than suffer the degradation of yourself. Be the woman whom I once spoke of—the woman I still have in my mind—who can nobly reveal the noble nature that is in her. And never forget this—my faith in you is as firm as ever!"

She looked at him proudly and gratefully.

"I am pledged to justify your faith in me," she said. "I have put it out of my own power to yield. Horace has my promise that I will explain everything to him, in this room."

Julian started.

"Has Horace himself asked it of you?" he inquired. "*He*, at least, has no suspicion of the truth."

"Horace has appealed to my duty to him as his betrothed wife," she answered. "He has the first claim to my confidence—he resents my silence, and he has a right to resent it. Terrible as it will be to open *his* eyes to the truth, I must do it if he asks me."

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She was looking at Julian while she spoke. The old longing to associate with the hard trial of the confession the one man who had felt for her and believed in her, revived under another form. If she could only know, while she was saying the fatal words to Horace, that Julian was listening too, she would be encouraged to meet the worst that could happen! As the idea crossed her mind, she observed that Julian was looking towards the door through which they had lately passed. In an instant she saw the means to her end. Hardly waiting to hear the few kind expressions of sympathy and approval which he addressed to her, she hinted timidly at the proposal which she had now to make to him.

"Are you going back into the next room?" she asked.

"Not if you object to it," he replied.

"I don't object. I want you to be there."

"After Horace has joined you?"

"Yes. After Horace has joined me."

"Do you wish to see me when it is over?"

She summoned her resolution, and told him frankly what she had in her mind.

"I want you to be near me while I am

speaking to Horace," she said. "It will give me courage if I can feel that I am speaking to you as well as to him. I can count on *your* sympathy—and sympathy is so precious to me now! Am I asking too much, if I ask you to leave the door unclosed, when you go back to the dining-room? Think of the dreadful trial—to him as well as to me! I am only a woman; I am afraid I may sink under it, if I have no friend near me. And I have no friend but you."

In those simple words she tried her powers of persuasion on him, for the first time.

Between perplexity and distress, Julian was, for the moment, at a loss how to answer her. The love for Mercy which he dared not acknowledge, was as vital a feeling in him as the faith in her which he had been free to avow. To refuse anything that she asked of him in her sore need—and, more even than that, to refuse to hear the confession which it had been her first impulse to make to *him*—these were cruel sacrifices to his sense of what was due to Horace and of what was due to himself. But shrink as he might, even from the appearance of deserting her, it was impos-

sible for him (except under a reserve which was almost equivalent to a denial) to grant her request.

"All that I can do, I will do," he said. "The door shall be left unclosed, and I will remain in the next room, on this condition—that Horace knows of it as well as you. I should be unworthy of your confidence in me if I consented to be a listener on any other terms. You understand that, I am sure, as well as I do."

She had never thought of her proposal to him in this light. Womanlike, she had thought of nothing but the comfort of having him near her. She understood him now. A faint flush of shame rose on her pale cheeks, as she thanked him. He delicately relieved her from her embarrassment by putting a question which naturally occurred under the circumstances.

"Where is Horace all this time?" he asked. "Why is he not here?"

"He has been called away," she answered, "by a message from Lady Janet."

The reply more than astonished Julian; it seemed almost to alarm him. He returned

to Mercy's chair, he said to her eagerly, "Are you sure?"

"Horace himself told me that Lady Janet had insisted on seeing him."

"When?"

"Not long ago. He said me to wait for him here, while he went upstairs."

Julian's face darkened ominously.

"This confirms my worst fears," he said. "Have *you* had any communication with Lady Janet?"

Mercy replied by showing him his aunt's note. He read it carefully through.

"Did I not tell you," he said, "that she would find some excuse for refusing to hear your confession? It begins by delaying it, simply to gain time for something else which she has it in her mind to do. When did you receive this note? Soon after you went upstairs?"

"About a quarter of an hour after, as well as I can guess."

"Do you know what happened down here, after you left us?"

"Horace told me that Lady Janet had offered Miss Roseberry the use of her boudoir."

"Any more?"

"He said it you had shown her the way to the room."

"Did he tell you what happened after that?"

"No."

"Then I must tell you. If I can do nothing more in this serious state of things, I can at least prevent your being taken by surprise. In the first place, it is right you should know that I had motive for accompanying Miss Roseberry to the boudoir. I was anxious (for your sake) to make some appeal to her better self—if she *had* any better self to address. My own I had doubts of my success—judging by what I had already seen of her. My doubts were confirmed. In the ordinary intercourse of life, I should merely have thought her a commonplace uninteresting woman. Seeing her as I saw her while we were alone—in other words, penetrating below the surface—I have never met, in all my sad experience, met with such a hopelessly narrow, mean, and low nature as hers. Understanding, as she could not fail to do, what the sudden change in Lady Janet's behaviour towards her really meant, her one idea was to take the

cruellest possible advantage of it. So far from feeling any consideration for *you*, she was only additionally embittered towards you. She protested against your being permitted to claim the merit of placing her in her right position here, by your own voluntary avowal of the truth. She insisted on publicly denouncing you, and on forcing Lady Janet to dismiss you, unheard, before the whole household. 'Now I can have my revenge! At last Lady Janet is afraid of me!' Those were her own words—I am almost ashamed to repeat them—those, on my honour, were her own words! Every possible humiliation to be heaped on you; no consideration to be shown for Lady Janet's age and Lady Janet's position; nothing, absolutely nothing, to be allowed to interfere with Miss Roseberry's vengeance and Miss Roseberry's triumph! There is this woman's shameless view of what is due to her, as stated by herself in the plainest terms. I kept my temper; I did all I could to bring her to a better frame of mind. I might as well have pleaded—I won't say with a savage; savages are sometimes accessible to remonstrance, if you know

how to reach them—I might as well have pleaded with a hungry animal to abstain from eating while food was within its reach. I had just given up the hopeless effort in disgust, when Lady Janet's maid appeared with a message for Miss Roseberry from her mistress: 'My lady's compliments, ma'am, and she will be glad to see you at your earliest convenience, in her room.'"

(Another surprise! Grace Roseberry invited to an interview with Lady Janet! It would have been impossible to believe it, if Julian had not heard the invitation given with his own ears.)

"She instantly rose," Julian proceeded. "'I won't keep her ladyship waiting a moment,' she said; 'show me the way.' She signed to the maid to go out of the room first, and then turned round and spoke to me from the door. I despair of describing the insolent exultation of her manner—I can only repeat her words: 'This is exactly what I wanted! I had intended to insist on seeing Lady Janet: she saves me the trouble; I am infinitely obliged to her.' With that, she nodded to me, and closed the door. I have not seen

her, I have not heard of her, since. For all I know, she may be still with my aunt, and Horace may have found her there when he entered the room."

"What can Lady Janet have to say to her?" Mercy asked, eagerly.

"It is impossible even to guess. When you found me in the dining-room I was considering that very question. I cannot imagine that any neutral ground can exist, on which it is possible for Lady Janet and this woman to meet. In her present frame of mind, she will in all probability insult Lady Janet before they have been five minutes together. I own I am completely puzzled. The one conclusion I can arrive at is, that the note which my aunt sent to you, the private interview with Miss Roseberry which has followed, and the summons to Horace which has succeeded in its turn, are all links in the same chain of events, and are all tending to that renewed temptation against which I have already warned you."

Mercy held up her hand for silence. She looked towards the door that opened on the hall; had she heard a footstep outside? No.

All was still. Not a sign yet of Horace's return.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "what would I not give to know what is going on upstairs!"

"You will soon know it now," said Julian. "It is impossible that our present uncertainty can last much longer."

He turned away, intending to go back to the room in which she had found him. Looking at her situation from a man's point of view, he naturally assumed that the best service he could now render to Mercy would be to leave her to prepare herself for the interview with Horace. Before he had taken three steps away from her, she showed him the difference between the woman's point of view and the man's. The idea of considering beforehand what she should say never entered her mind. In her horror of being left by herself at that critical moment, she forgot every other consideration. Even the warning remembrance of Horace's jealous distrust of Julian passed away from her as completely, as if it had never had a place in her memory. "Don't leave me!" she cried. "I can't wait here alone. Come back—come back!"

She rose impulsively, while she spoke, as if to follow him into the dining-room, if he persisted in leaving her.

A momentary expression of doubt crossed Julian's face as he retraced his steps and signed to her to be seated again. Could she be depended on (he asked himself) to sustain the coming test of her resolution, when she had not courage enough to wait for events in a room by herself? Julian had yet to learn that a woman's courage rises with the greatness of the emergency. Ask her to accompany you through a field in which some harmless cattle happen to be grazing, and it is doubtful, in nine cases out of ten, if she will do it. Ask her, as one of the passengers in a ship on fire, to help in setting an example of composure to the rest, and it is certain, in nine cases out of ten, that she will do it. As soon as Julian had taken a chair near her, Mercy was calm again.

"Are you sure of your resolution?" he asked.

"I am certain of it," she answered, "as long as you don't leave me by myself."

The talk between them dropped there.

They sat together, in silence, with their eyes fixed on the door, waiting for Horace to come in.

After the lapse of a few minutes, their attention was attracted by a sound outside in the grounds. A carriage of some sort was plainly audible, approaching the house.

The carriage stopped; the bell rang; the front door was opened. Had a visitor arrived? No voice could be heard making inquiries. No footsteps but the servant's footsteps crossed the hall. A long pause followed; the carriage remaining at the door. Instead of bringing some one to the house, it had apparently arrived to take some one away.

The next event was the return of the servant to the front door. They listened again. Again, no second footstep was audible. The door was closed; the servant recrossed the hall; the carriage was driven away. Judging by sounds alone, no one had arrived at the house, and no one had left the house.

Julian looked at Mercy. "Do you understand this?" he asked.

She silently shook her head.

"If any person has gone away in the carriage," Julian went on, "that person can hardly have been a man, or we must have heard him in the hall."

The conclusion which her companion had just drawn from the noiseless departure of the supposed visitor, raised a sudden doubt in Mercy's mind.

"Go, and inquire!" she said eagerly.

Julian left the room; and returned again, after a brief absence, with signs of grave anxiety in his face and manner.

"I told you I dreaded the most trifling events that were passing about us," he said. "An event, which is far from being trifling, has just happened. The carriage which we heard approaching along the drive, turns out to have been a cab sent for from the house. The person who has gone away in it"——

"Is a woman, as you supposed?"

"Yes."

Mercy rose excitedly from her chair.

"It can't be Grace Roseberry?" she exclaimed.

"It *is* Grace Roseberry."

"Has she gone away alone?"

"Alone—after an interview with Lady Janet."

"Did she go willingly?"

"She herself sent the servant for the cab."

"What does it mean?"

"It is useless to inquire. We shall soon know."

They resumed their seats; waiting, as they had waited already, with their eyes on the library door.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-THIRD.

LADY JANET AT BAY.

THE narrative leaves Julian and Mercy for awhile, and, ascending to the upper regions of the house, follows the march of events in Lady Janet's room.

The maid had delivered her mistress's note to Mercy, and had gone away again on her second errand to Grace Roseberry in the boudoir. Lady Janet was seated at her writing-table, waiting for the appearance of the woman whom she had summoned to her presence. A single lamp diffused its mild light over the books, pictures, and busts round her, leaving the farther end of the room, in which the bed was placed, almost

lost in obscurity. The works of art were all portraits; the books were all presentation copies from the authors. It was Lady Janet's fancy to associate her bedroom with memorials of the various persons whom she had known in the long course of her life—all of them more or less distinguished; most of them, by this time, gathered with the dead.

She sat near her writing-table, lying back in her easy-chair—the living realisation of the picture which Julian's description had drawn. Her eyes were fixed on a photographic likeness of Mercy, which was so raised upon a little gilt easel as to enable her to contemplate it under the full light of the lamp. The bright mobile old face was strangely and sadly-changed. The brow was fixed; the mouth was rigid; the whole face would have been like a mask, moulded in the hardest forms of passive resistance and suppressed rage, but for the light and life still thrown over it by the eyes. There was something unutterably touching in the keen hungering tenderness of the look which they fixed on the portrait, intensified by an underlying expression of fond and patient reproach.

The danger which Julian so wisely dreaded was in the rest of the face; the love which he had so truly described was in the eyes alone. *They* still spoke of the cruelly-profaned affection which had been the one immeasurable joy, the one inexhaustible hope, of Lady Janet's closing life. The brow expressed nothing but her obstinate determination to stand by the wreck of that joy, to rekindle the dead ashes of that hope. The lips were only eloquent of her unflinching resolution to ignore the hateful present and to save the sacred past. "My idol may be shattered, but none of you shall know it. I stop the march of discovery; I extinguish the light of truth. I am deaf to your words, I am blind to your proofs. At seventy years old, my idol is my life. It shall be my idol still."

The silence in the bed-room was broken by a murmuring of women's voices outside the door.

Lady Janet instantly raised herself in the chair, and snatched the photograph off the easel. She laid the portrait face downwards

among some papers on the table—then abruptly changed her mind, and hid it among the thick folds of lace which clothed her neck and bosom. There was a world of love in the action itself, and in the sudden softening of the eyes which accompanied it. The next moment Lady Janet's mask was on. Any superficial observer who had seen her now, would have said, "This is a hard woman!"

The door was opened by the maid. Grace Roseberry entered the room.

She advanced rapidly, with a defiant assurance in her manner, and a lofty carriage of her head. She sat down in the chair to which Lady Janet silently pointed, with a thump; she returned Lady Janet's grave bow with a nod and a smile. Every movement and every look of the little worn, white-faced, shabbily-dressed woman expressed insolent triumph, and said, as if in words, "My turn has come!"

"I am glad to wait on your ladyship," she began, without giving Lady Janet an opportunity of speaking first. "Indeed, I should have felt it my duty to request an interview,

if you had not sent your maid to invite me up here."

"You would have felt it your duty to request an interview?" Lady Janet repeated very gently. "Why?"

The one word which that question last word was spoken embarrassed Grace at the outset. It established as much distance between Lady Janet and herself as if she had been lifted in her chair and conveyed bodily to the other end of the room.

"I am surprised that your ladyship should not understand me," she said, struggling to conceal her confusion. "Especially after you have left me in your own boudoir."

Lady Janet remained perfectly unmoved. "I do *not* understand you," she answered, just as quietly as ever.

Grace's temper came to her assistance. She recovered the assurance which had marked her first appearance on the scene.

"In that case," she resumed, "I must enter into particulars in justice to myself. I can place but one interpretation on the extraordinary change in your ladyship's behaviour to me downstairs. The conduct of that

abominable woman has, at last, opened your eyes to the deception that has been practised on you. For some reason of your own, however, you have not yet chosen to recognise me openly. In this painful position, something is due to my own self-respect. I cannot, and will not, permit Mercy Merrick to claim the merit of restoring me to my proper place in this house. After what I have suffered, it is quite impossible for me to endure that. I should have requested an interview (if you had not sent for me) for the express purpose of claiming this person's immediate expulsion from the house. I claim it now as a proper concession to Me. Whatever you or Mr. Julian Gray may do, I will not tamely permit her to exhibit herself as an interesting penitent. It is really a little too much to hear this brazen adventuress appoint her own time for explaining herself. It is too deliberately insulting to see her sail out of the room —with a clergyman of the Church of England opening the door for her—as if she was laying me under an obligation! I can forgive much, Lady Janet, including the terms in which you thought it decent to order me out

of your house. I am quite willing to accept the offer of your boudoir, as the expression on your part of a better frame of mind. But even Christian Charity has its limits. The continued presence of that wretch under your roof is, you will permit me to remark, not only a monument of your own weakness, but a perfectly insufferable insult to Me."

There she stopped abruptly—not for want of words, but for want of a listener.

Lady Janet was not even pretending to attend to her. Lady Janet, with a deliberate rudeness entirely foreign to her usual habits, was composedly busying herself in arranging the various papers scattered about the table. Some she tied together with little morsels of string; some she placed under paper-weights; some she deposited in the fantastic pigeon-holes of a little Japanese cabinet—working with a placid enjoyment of her own orderly occupation, and perfectly unaware, to all outward appearance, that any second person was in the room. She looked up with her papers in both hands when Grace stopped, and said quietly,

"Have you done?"

"Is your ladyship's purpose in sending for me to treat me with studied rudeness?" Grace retorted angrily.

"My purpose in sending for you is to say something, as soon as you will allow me the opportunity."

The impenetrable composure of that reply took Grace completely by surprise. She had no retort ready. In sheer astonishment she waited silently, with her eyes riveted on the mistress of the house.

Lady Janet put down her papers, and settled herself comfortably in the easy-chair, preparatory to opening the interview on her side.

"The little that I have to say to you," she began, "may be said in a question. Am I right in supposing that you have no present employment, and that a little advance in money (delicately offered) would be very acceptable to you?"

"Do you mean to insult me, Lady Janet?"

"Certainly not. I mean to ask you a question."

"Your question is an insult."

"My question is a kindness, if you will

only understand it as it is intended. I don't complain of your not understanding it. I don't even hold you responsible for any one of the many breaches of good manners which you have committed since you have been in this room. I was honestly anxious to be of some service to you, and you have repelled my advances. I am sorry. Let us drop the subject."

Expressing herself with the most perfect temper in those terms, Lady Janet resumed the arrangement of her papers, and became unconscious once more of the presence of any second person in the room.

Grace opened her lips to reply with the utmost intemperance of an angry woman, and, thinking better of it, controlled herself. It was plainly useless to take the violent way with Lady Janet Roy. Her age and her social position were enough of themselves to repel any violence. She evidently knew that, and trusted to it. Grace resolved to meet the enemy on the neutral ground of politeness, as the most promising ground that she could occupy under present circumstances.

"If I have said anything hasty, I beg to

apologise to your ladyship," she began. "May I ask if your only object in sending for me was to inquire into my pecuniary affairs, with a view to assisting me?"

"That," said Lady Janet, "was my only object."

"You had nothing to say to me on the subject of Mercy Merrick?"

"Nothing whatever. I am weary of hearing of Mercy Merrick. Have you any more questions to ask me?"

"I have one more."

"Yes?"

"I wish to ask your ladyship whether you propose to recognise me in the presence of your household as the late Colonel Roseberry's daughter?"

"I have already recognised you as a lady in embarrassed circumstances, who has peculiar claims on my consideration and forbearance. If you wish me to repeat those words in the presence of the servants (absurd as it is) I am ready to comply with your request."

Grace's temper began to get the better of her prudent resolutions.

"Lady Janet!" she said, "this won't do. I must request you to express yourself plainly. You talk of my peculiar claims on your forbearance. What claims do you mean?"

"It will be painful to both of us if we enter into details," replied Lady Janet. "Pray don't let us enter into details."

"I insist on it, madam."

"Pray don't insist on it."

Grace was deaf to remonstrance.

"I ask you in plain words," she went on, "do you acknowledge that you have been deceived by an adventuress who has personated me? Do you mean to restore me to my proper place in this house?"

Lady Janet returned to the arrangement of her papers.

"Does your ladyship refuse to listen to me?"

Lady Janet looked up from her papers as blandly as ever.

"If *you* persist in returning to your delusion," she said, "you will oblige *me* to persist in returning to my papers."

"What is my delusion, if you please?"

"Your delusion is expressed in the questions you have just put to me. Your delusion constitutes your peculiar claim on my forbearance. Nothing you can say or do will shake my forbearance. When I first found you in the dining-room, I acted most improperly; I lost my temper. I did worse; I was foolish enough and imprudent enough to send for a police-officer. I owe you every possible atonement (afflicted as you are) for treating you in that cruel manner. I offered you the use of my boudoir, as part of my atonement. I sent for you, in the hope that you would allow me to assist you, as part of my atonement. You may behave rudely to me, you may speak in the most abusive terms of my adopted daughter; I will submit to anything, as part of my atonement. So long as you abstain from speaking on one painful subject, I will listen to you with the greatest pleasure. Whenever you return to that subject I shall return to my papers."

Grace looked at Lady Janet with an evil smile.

"I begin to understand your ladyship," she said. "You are ashamed to acknowledge

that you have been grossly imposed upon. Your only alternative, of course, is to ignore everything that has happened. Pray count on *my* forbearance. I am not at all offended —I am merely amused. It is not every day that a lady of high rank exhibits herself in such a position as yours to an obscure woman like me. Your humane consideration for me dates, I presume, from the time when your adopted daughter set you the example, by ordering the police-officer out of the room ?"

Lady Janet's composure was proof even against this assault on it. She gravely accepted Grace's inquiry as a question addressed to her in perfect good faith.

"I am not at all surprised," she replied, "to find that my adopted daughter's interference has exposed her to misrepresentation. She ought to have remonstrated with me privately before she interfered. But she has one fault—she is too impulsive. I have never, in all my experience, met with such a warm-hearted person as she is. Always too considerate of others; always too forgetful of herself! The mere appearance of the police-officer placed you in a situation to appeal to

her compassion, and her impulses carried her away as usual. My fault! All my fault!"

Grace changed her tone once more. She was quick enough to discern that Lady Janet was a match for her with her own weapons.

"We have had enough of this," she said. "It is time to be serious. Your adopted daughter (as you call her) is Mercy Merrick, —and you know it."

Lady Janet returned to her papers.

"I am Grace Roseberry, whose name she has stolen,—and you know *that.*"

Lady Janet went on with her papers.

Grace got up from her chair.

"I accept your silence, Lady Janet," she said, "as an acknowledgment of your deliberate resolution to suppress the truth. You are evidently determined to receive the adventuress as the true woman; and you don't scruple to face the consequences of that proceeding, by pretending to my face to believe that I am mad. I will not allow myself to be impudently cheated out of my rights in this way. You will hear from me again, madam, when the Canadian mail arrives in England."

She walked towards the door. This time Lady Janet answered, as readily and as explicitly as it was possible to desire.

"I shall refuse to receive your letters," she said.

Grace returned a few steps, threateningly.

"My letters will be followed by my witnesses," she proceeded.

"I shall refuse to receive your witnesses."

"Refuse at your peril. I will appeal to the law!"

Lady Janet smiled.

"I don't pretend to much knowledge of the subject," she said; "but I should be surprised indeed, if I discovered that you had any claim on me which the law could enforce. However, let us suppose that you *can* set the law in action. You know as well as I do, that the only motive power which can do that is—money. I am rich; fees, costs, and all the rest of it are matters of no sort of consequence to me. May I ask if you are in the same position?"

The question silenced Grace. So far as money was concerned, she was literally at the end of her resources. Her only friends were

friends in Canada. After what she had said to him in the boudoir, it would be quite useless to appeal to the sympathies of Julian Gray. In the pecuniary sense, and in one word, she was absolutely incapable of gratifying her own vindictive longings. And there sat the mistress of Mablethorpe House, perfectly well aware of it.

Lady Janet pointed to the empty chair.

"Suppose you sit down again?" she suggested. "The course of our interview seems to have brought us back to the question that I asked you when you came into my room. Instead of threatening me with the law, suppose you consider the propriety of permitting me to be of some use to you? I am in the habit of assisting ladies in embarrassed circumstances, and nobody knows of it but my steward—who keeps the accounts—and myself. Once more, let me inquire if a little advance of the pecuniary sort (delicately offered) would be acceptable to you?"

Grace returned slowly to the chair that she had left. She stood by it, with one hand grasping the top rail, and with her eyes fixed in mocking scrutiny on Lady Janet's face.

"At last your ladyship shows your hand," she said. "Hush-money!"

"You *will* send me back to my papers," rejoined Lady Janet. "How obstinate you are!"

Grace's hand closed tighter and tighter round the rail of the chair. Without witnesses, without means, without so much as a refuge—thanks to her own coarse cruelties of language and conduct—in the sympathies of others, the sense of her isolation and her helplessness was almost maddening at that final moment. A woman of finer sensibilities would have instantly left the room. Grace's impenetrably hard and narrow mind impelled her to meet the emergency in a very different way. A last base vengeance, to which Lady Janet had voluntarily exposed herself, was still within her reach. "For the present," she thought, "there is but one way of being even with your ladyship. I can cost you as much as possible."

"Pray make some allowances for me," she said. "I am not obstinate—I am only a little awkward at matching the audacity of a lady of high rank. I shall improve with practice. My own language is, as I am painfully

aware, only plain English. Permit me to withdraw it, and to substitute yours. What advance is your ladyship (delicately) prepared to offer me?"

Lady Janet opened a drawer, and took out her cheque-book.

The moment of relief had come at last! The only question now left to discuss was evidently the question of amount. Lady Janet considered a little. The question of amount was (to her mind) in some sort a question of conscience as well. Her love for Mercy and her loathing for Grace, her horror of seeing her darling degraded and her affection profaned by a public exposure, had hurried her—there was no disputing it—into treating an injured woman harshly. Hateful as Grace Roseberry might be, her father had left her, in his last moments, with Lady Janet's full concurrence, to Lady Janet's care. But for Mercy, she would have been received at Mablethorpe House as Lady Janet's companion, with a salary of one hundred pounds a year. On the other hand, how long (with such a temper as she had revealed) would Grace have remained in the service of her

protectress? She would, probably, have been dismissed in a few weeks, with a year's salary to compensate her, and with a recommendation to some suitable employment. What would be a fair compensation now? Lady Janet decided that five years' salary immediately given, and future assistance rendered if necessary, would represent a fit remembrance of the late Colonel Roseberry's claims, and a liberal pecuniary acknowledgment of any harshness of treatment which Grace might have sustained at her hands. At the same time, and for the further satisfying of her own conscience, she determined to discover the sum which Grace herself would consider sufficient, by the simple process of making Grace herself propose the terms.

"It is impossible for me to make you an offer," she said, "for this reason,—your need of money will depend greatly on your future plans. I am quite ignorant of your future plans."

"Perhaps your ladyship will kindly advise me?" said Grace satirically.

"I cannot altogether undertake to advise you," Lady Janet replied. "I can only sup-

pose that you will scarcely remain in England, where you have no friends. Whether you go to law with me or not, you will surely feel the necessity of communicating personally with your friends in Canada. Am I right?"

Grace was quite quick enough to understand this as it was meant. Properly interpreted the answer signified—"If you take your compensation in money, it is understood, as part of the bargain, that you don't remain in England to annoy me."

"Your ladyship is quite right," she said. "I shall certainly not remain in England. I shall consult my friends—and," she added mentally, "go to law with you afterwards, if I possibly can, with your own money!"

"You will return to Canada," Lady Janet proceeded; "and your prospects there will be, probably, a little uncertain at first. Taking this into consideration, at what amount do you estimate, in your own mind, the pecuniary assistance which you will require?"

"May I count on your ladyship's kindness to correct me if my own ignorant calculations turn out to be wrong?" Grace asked innocently.

Here again the words, properly interpreted, had a special signification of their own: "It is stipulated, on my part, that I put myself up to auction, and that my estimate shall be regulated by your ladyship's highest bid." Thoroughly understanding the stipulation, Lady Janet bowed, and waited gravely.

Gravely, on her side, Grace began.

"I am afraid I should want more than a hundred pounds," she said.

Lady Janet made her first bid. "I think so too."

"More, perhaps, than two hundred?"

Lady Janet made her second bid. "Probably."

"More than than three hundred? Four hundred? Five hundred?"

Lady Janet made her highest bid. "Five hundred pounds will do," she said.

In spite of herself, Grace's rising colour betrayed her ungovernable excitement. From her earliest childhood she had been accustomed to see shillings and sixpences carefully considered before they were parted with. She had never known her father to possess so much as five golden sovereigns at his own

disposal (unencumbered by debt) in all her experience of him. The atmosphere in which she had lived and breathed was the all-stifling atmosphere of genteel poverty. There was something horrible in the greedy eagerness of her eyes as they watched Lady Janet, to see if she was really sufficiently in earnest to give away five hundred pounds sterling with a stroke of her pen.

Lady Janet wrote the cheque in a few seconds, and pushed it across the table.

Grace's hungry eyes devoured the golden line, "Pay to myself or bearer five hundred pounds," and verified the signature beneath, "Janet Roy." Once sure of the money whenever she chose to take it, the native meanness of her nature instantly asserted itself. She tossed her head, and let the cheque lie on the table, with an over-acted appearance of caring very little whether she took it or not.

"Your ladyship is not to suppose that I snap at your cheque," she said.

Lady Janet leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. The very sight of Grace Roseberry sickened her. Her mind filled

suddenly with the image of Mercy. She longed to feast her eyes again on that grand beauty, to fill her ears again with the melody of that gentle voice.

"I require time to consider—in justice to my own self-respect," Grace went on.

Lady Janet wearily made a sign, granting time to consider.

"Your ladyship's boudoir is, I presume, still at my disposal?"

Lady Janet silently granted the boudoir.

"And your ladyship's servants are at my orders, if I have occasion to employ them?"

Lady Janet suddenly opened her eyes. "The whole household is at your orders!" she cried furiously. "Leave me!"

Grace was far from being offended. If anything, she was gratified—there was a certain triumph in having stung Lady Janet into an open outbreak of temper. She insisted forthwith on another condition.

"In the event of my deciding to receive the cheque," she said, "I cannot, consistently with my own self-respect, permit it to be delivered to me otherwise than enclosed. Your

ladyship will (if necessary) be so kind as to enclose it. Good evening."

She sauntered to the door; looking from side to side, with an air of supreme disparagement, at the priceless treasures of art which adorned the walls. Her eyes dropped superciliously on the carpet (the design of a famous French painter) as if her feet condescended in walking over it. The audacity with which she had entered the room had been marked enough; it shrank to nothing before the infinitely superior proportions of the insolence with which she left it.

The instant the door was closed Lady Janet rose from her chair. Reckless of the wintry chill in the outer air, she threw open one of the windows. "Pah!" she exclaimed, with a shudder of disgust, "the very air of the room is tainted by her!"

She returned to her chair. Her mood changed, as she sat down again—her heart was with Mercy once more. "Oh, my love!" she murmured, "how low I have stooped, how miserably I have degraded myself—and all for You!" The bitterness of the retrospect was unendurable. The inbred force of

the woman's nature took refuge from it in an outburst of defiance and despair. "Whatever she has done, that wretch deserves it! Not a living creature in this house shall say she has deceived me. She has *not* deceived me—she loves me! What do I care whether she has given me her true name or not? She has given me her true heart. What right had Julian to play upon her feelings and pry into her secrets? My poor tempted, tortured child! I won't hear her confession. Not another word shall she say to any living creature. I am mistress—I will forbid it at once!" She snatched a sheet of note-paper from the case; hesitated; and threw it from her on the table. "Why not send for my darling?" she thought. "Why write?" She hesitated once more, and resigned the idea. "No! I can't trust myself! I daren't see her yet!"

She took up the sheet of paper again, and wrote her second message to Mercy. This time, the note began fondly with a familiar form of address.

"MY DEAR CHILD,—I have had time to

think, and compose myself a little, since I last wrote, requesting you to defer the explanation which you had promised me. I already understand (and appreciate) the motives which led you to interfere as you did downstairs, and I now ask you to entirely abandon the explanation. It will, I am sure, be painful to you (for reasons of your own into which I have no wish to inquire) to produce the person of whom you spoke, and as you know already, I myself am weary of hearing of her. Besides, there is really no need now for you to explain anything. The stranger whose visits here have caused us so much pain and anxiety will trouble us no more. She leaves England of her own free will, after a conversation with me which has perfectly succeeded in composing and satisfying her. Not a word more, my dear, to me, or to my nephew, or to any other human creature, of what has happened in the dining-room to-day. When we next meet, let it be understood between us that the past is henceforth and for ever *buried in oblivion.* This is not only the earnest request—it is, if neces-

sary, the positive command of your mother and friend,

"JANET ROY.

"P.S.—I shall find opportunities (before you leave your room) of speaking separately to my nephew and to Horace Holmcroft. You need dread no embarrassment, when you next meet them. I will not ask you to answer my note in writing. Say yes, to the maid who will bring it to you, and I shall know we understand each other."

After sealing the envelope which inclosed these lines, Lady Janet addressed it, as usual, to "Miss Grace Roseberry." She was just rising to ring the bell, when the maid appeared with a message from the boudoir. The woman's tones and looks showed plainly that she had been made the object of Grace's insolent self-assertion as well as her mistress.

"If you please, my lady, the person downstairs wishes"——

Lady Janet, frowning contemptuously, interrupted the message at the outset. "I know what the person downstairs wishes. She has sent you for a letter from me?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Anything more?"

"She has sent one of the men-servants, my lady, for a cab. If your ladyship had only heard how she spoke to him!"——

Lady Janet intimated by a sign that she would rather not hear. She at once inclosed the cheque in an undirected envelope.

"Take that to her," she said, "and then come back to me."

Dismissing Grace Roseberry from all further consideration, Lady Janet sat, with her letter to Mercy in her hand, reflecting on her position, and on the efforts which it might still demand from her. Pursuing this train of thought, it now occurred to her that accident might bring Horace and Mercy together at any moment, and that, in Horace's present frame of mind, he would certainly insist on the explanation which it was the foremost interest of her life to suppress. The dread of this disaster was in full possession of her when the maid returned.

"Where is Mr. Holmcroft?" she asked, the moment the woman entered the room.

"I saw him open the library door, my lady, just now, on my way upstairs."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Go to him, and say I want to see him here immediately."

The maid withdrew on her second errand. Lady Janet rose restlessly, and closed the open window. Her impatient desire to make sure of Horace so completely mastered her, that she left her room, and met the woman in the corridor on her return. Receiving Horace's message of excuse, she instantly sent back the peremptory rejoinder, "Say that he will oblige me to go to him, if he persists in refusing to come to me. And, stay!" she added, remembering the undelivered letter. "Send Miss Roseberry's maid here; I want her."

Left alone again, Lady Janet paced once or twice up and down the corridor—then grew suddenly weary of the sight of it, and went back to her room. The two maids returned together. One of them, having announced Horace's submission, was dismissed. The other was sent to Mercy's room, with Lady Janet's letter. In a minute or two, the messenger appeared again, with the news that she had found the room empty.

"Have you any idea where Miss Roseberry is?"

"No, my lady."

Lady Janet reflected for a moment. If Horace presented himself without any needless delay, the plain inference would be that she had succeeded in separating him from Mercy. If his appearance was suspiciously deferred, she decided on personally searching for Mercy in the reception-rooms on the lower floor of the house.

"What have you done with the letter?" she asked.

"I left it on Miss Roseberry's table, my lady."

"Very well. Keep within hearing of the bell, in case I want you again."

Another minute brought Lady Janet's suspense to an end. She heard the welcome sound of a knock at her door from a man's hand. Horace hurriedly entered the room.

"What is it you want with me, Lady Janet?" he inquired, not very graciously.

"Sit down, Horace, and you shall hear."

Horace did not accept the invitation.

"Excuse me," he said, "if I mention that I am rather in a hurry."

"Why are you in a hurry?"

"I have reasons for wishing to see Grace as soon as possible."

"And *I* have reasons," Lady Janet rejoined, "for wishing to speak to you about Grace before you see her; serious reasons. Sit down."

Horace started. "Serious reasons?" he repeated. "You surprise me."

"I shall surprise you still more before I have done."

Their eyes met, as Lady Janet answered in those terms. Horace observed signs of agitation in her, which he now noticed for the first time. His face darkened with an expression of sullen distrust—and he took the chair in silence.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FOURTH.

LADY JANET'S LETTER.

THE narrative leaves Lady Janet and Horace Holmcroft together, and returns to Julian and Mercy in the library.

An interval passed—a long interval, measured by the impatient reckoning of suspense—after the cab which had taken Grace Roseberry away had left the house. The minutes followed each other; and still the warning sound of Horace's footstep was not heard on the marble pavement of the hall. By common (though unexpressed) consent, Julian and Mercy avoided touching upon the one subject on which they were now both inte-

rested alike. With their thoughts fixed secretly in vain speculation on the nature of the interview which was then taking place in Lady Janet's room, they tried to speak on topics indifferent to both of them—tried, and failed, and tried again. In a last, and longest pause of silence between them, the next event happened. The door from the hall was softly and suddenly opened.

Was it Horace? No—not even yet! The person who had opened the door was only Mercy's maid.

"My lady's love, miss; and will you please to read this directly?"

Giving her message in those terms, the woman produced from the pocket of her apron Lady Janet's second letter to Mercy, with a strip of paper oddly pinned round the envelope. Mercy detached the paper, and found on the inner side some lines in pencil, hurriedly written in Lady Janet's hand. They ran thus:

"Don't lose a moment in reading my letter. And mind this, when H. returns to you—meet him firmly: say nothing."

Enlightened by the warning words which

Julian had spoken to her, Mercy was at no loss to place the right interpretation on those strange lines. Instead of immediately opening the letter, she stopped the maid at the library door. Julian's suspicion of the most trifling events that were taking place in the house had found its way from his mind to hers. "Wait!" she said. "I don't understand what is going on upstairs; I want to ask you something."

The woman came back—not very willingly.

"How did you know I was here?" Mercy inquired.

"If you please, miss, her ladyship ordered me to take the letter to you some little time since. You were not in your room, and I left it on your table"——

"I understand that. But how came you to bring the letter here?"

"My lady rang for me, miss. Before I could knock at her door, she came out into the corridor, with that morsel of paper in her hand"——

"So as to keep you from entering her room?"

"Yes, miss. Her ladyship wrote on the paper in a great hurry, and told me to pin it round the letter that I had left in your room. I was to take them both together to you and to let nobody see me. 'You will find Miss Roseberry in the library' (her ladyship says), 'and run, run, run! there isn't a moment to lose!' Those were her own words, miss."

"Did you hear anything in the room before Lady Janet came out, and met you?"

The woman hesitated, and looked at Julian.

"I hardly know whether I ought to tell you, miss."

Julian turned away to leave the library. Mercy stopped him by a motion of her hand.

"You know that I shall not get you into any trouble," she said to the maid. "And you may speak quite safely before Mr. Julian Gray."

Thus reassured, the maid spoke.

"To own the truth, miss, I heard Mr. Holmcroft in my lady's room. His voice sounded as if he was angry. I may say they were both angry—Mr. Holmcroft and my lady." (She turned to Julian.) "And just before her ladyship came out, sir, I heard

your name—as if it was you they were having words about. I can't say exactly what it was; I hadn't time to hear. And I didn't listen, miss. The door was ajar; and the voices were so loud, nobody could help hearing them."

It was useless to detain the woman any longer. Having given her leave to withdraw, Mercy turned to Julian.

"Why were they quarrelling about you?" she asked.

Julian pointed to the unopened letter in her hand.

"The answer to your question may be there," he said. "Read the letter while you have the chance. And if I can advise you, say so at once."

With a strange reluctance, she opened the envelope. With a sinking heart she read the lines in which Lady Janet, as "mother and friend," commanded her absolutely to suppress the confession which she had pledged herself to make in the sacred interests of justice and truth. A low cry of despair escaped her, as the cruel complication in her position revealed itself in all its unmerited

hardship. "Oh, Lady Janet, Lady Janet!" she thought, "there was but one trial more left in my hard lot—and it comes to me from *you!*"

She handed the letter to Julian. He took it from her in silence; turning paler and paler as he read it. His eyes rested on her compassionately as he handed it back.

"To my mind," he said, "Lady Janet herself sets all further doubt at rest. Her letter tells me what she wanted when she sent for Horace, and why my name was mentioned between them."

"Tell me!" cried Mercy, eagerly.

He did not immediately answer her. He sat down again in the chair by her side, and pointed to the letter.

"Has Lady Janet shaken your resolution?" he asked.

"She has strengthened my resolution," Mercy answered. "She has added a new bitterness to my remorse."

She did not mean it harshly; but the reply sounded harshly in Julian's ear. It stirred the generous impulses which were the strongest impulses in his nature. He who had once

pleaded with Mercy for compassionate consideration for herself, now pleaded with her for compassionate consideration for Lady Janet. With persuasive gentleness, he drew a little nearer, and laid his hand on her arm.

"Don't judge her harshly," he said. "She is wrong, miserably wrong. She has recklessly degraded herself; she has recklessly tempted you. Still, is it generous—is it even just—to hold her responsible for deliberate sin? She is at the close of her days; she can feel no new affection; she can never replace you. View her position in that light, and you will see (as I see) that it is no base motive which has led her astray. Think of her wounded heart and her wasted life—and say to yourself forgivingly, She loves me!"

Mercy's eyes filled with tears.

"I do say it!" she answered. "Not forgivingly—it is *I* who have need of forgiveness. I say it gratefully when I think of her—I say it with shame and sorrow when I think of myself."

He took her hand for the first time. He looked, guiltlessly looked, at her downcast face. He spoke as he had spoken at the

memorable interview between them, which had made a new woman of her.

"I can imagine no crueller trial," he said, "than the trial that is now before you. The benefactress to whom you owe everything, asks nothing from you but your silence. The person whom you have wronged is no longer present to stimulate your resolution to speak. Horace himself (unless I am entirely mistaken) will not hold you to the explanation that you have promised. The temptation to keep your false position in this house is, I do not scruple to say, all but irresistible. Sister and friend! can you still justify my faith in you? Will you still own the truth, without the base fear of discovery to drive you to it?"

She lifted her head, with the steady light of resolution shining again in her grand grey eyes. Her low sweet voice answered him, without a faltering note in it.

"I will!"

"You will do justice to the woman whom you have wronged—unworthy as she is; powerless as she is to expose you?"

"I will!"

"You will sacrifice everything you have

gained by the fraud to the sacred duty of atonement? You will suffer anything—even though you offend the second mother who has loved you and sinned for you—rather than suffer the degradation of yourself?"

Her hand closed firmly on his. Again, and for the last time, she answered,

"I will!"

His voice had not trembled yet. It failed him now. His next words were spoken in faint whispering tones—to himself; not to her.

"Thank God for this day!" he said. "I have been of some service to one of the noblest of God's creatures!"

Some subtle influence, as he spoke, passed from his hand to hers. It trembled through her nerves; it entwined itself mysteriously with the finest sensibilities in her nature; it softly opened her heart to a first vague surmising of the devotion that she had inspired in him. A faint glow of colour, lovely in its faintness, stole over her face and neck. Her breathing quickened tremblingly. She drew her hand away from him, and sighed when she had released it.

He rose suddenly to his feet and left her, without a word or a look, walking slowly down the length of the room. When he turned and came back to her, his face was composed; he was master of himself again.

Mercy was the first to speak. She turned the conversation from herself by reverting to the proceedings in Lady Janet's room.

"You spoke of Horace just now," she said, "in terms which surprised me. You appeared to think that he would not hold me to my explanation. Is that one of the conclusions which you draw from Lady Janet's letter?"

"Most assuredly," Julian answered. "You will see the conclusion as I see it, if we return for a moment to Grace Roseberry's departure from the house."

Mercy interrupted him there. "Can you guess," she asked, "how Lady Janet prevailed upon her to go?"

"I hardly like to own it," said Julian. "There is an expression in the letter which suggests to me that Lady Janet has offered

her money, and that she has taken the bribe."

"Oh, I can't think that!"

"Let us return to Horace. Miss Roseberry once out of the house, but one serious obstacle is left in Lady Janet's way. That obstacle is Horace Holmcroft."

"How is Horace an obstacle?"

"He is an obstacle in this sense. He is under an engagement to marry you in a week's time; and Lady Janet is determined to keep him (as she is determined to keep every one else) in ignorance of the truth. She will do that without scruple. But the inbred sense of honour in her is not utterly silenced yet. She cannot, she dare not, let Horace make you his wife, under the false impression that you are Colonel Roseberry's daughter. You see the situation? On the one hand she won't enlighten him. On the other hand, she cannot allow him to marry you blindfold. In this emergency, what is she to do? There is but one alternative that I can discover. She must persuade Horace (or she must irritate Horace) into

acting for himself, and breaking off the engagement on his own responsibility."

Mercy stopped him. "Impossible!" she cried warmly. "Impossible!"

"Look again at her letter," Julian rejoined. "It tells you plainly that you need fear no embarrassment when you next meet Horace. If words mean anything, those words mean that he will not claim from you the confidence which you have promised to repose in him. On what condition is it possible for him to abstain from doing that? On the one condition that you have ceased to represent the first and foremost interest of his life."

Mercy still held firm. "You are wronging Lady Janet," she said.

Julian smiled sadly.

"Try to look at it," he answered, "from Lady Janet's point of view. Do you suppose *she* sees anything derogatory to her in attempting to break off the marriage? I will answer for it she believes she is doing you a kindness. In one sense, it *would* be a kindness to spare you the shame of a humiliating confession, and to save you (possibly) from being rejected to your face by the man

you love. In my opinion, the thing is done already. I have reasons of my own for believing that my aunt will succeed far more easily than she could anticipate. Horace's temper will help her."

Mercy's mind began to yield to him, in spite of herself.

"What do you mean by Horace's temper?" she inquired.

"Must you ask me that?" he said, drawing back a little from her.

"I must."

"I mean by Horace's temper, Horace's unworthy distrust of the interest that I feel in you."

She instantly understood him. And more than that, she secretly admired him for the scrupulous delicacy with which he had expressed himself. Another man would not have thought of sparing her in that way. Another man would have said plainly, "Horace is jealous of me."

Julian did not wait for her to answer him. He considerately went on.

"For the reason that I have just mentioned," he said, "Horace will be easily irri-

tated into taking a course which, in his calmer moments, nothing would induce him to adopt. Until I heard what your maid said to you, I had thought (for your sake) of retiring before he joined you here. Now I know that my name has been introduced, and has made mischief upstairs, I feel the necessity (for your sake again) of meeting Horace and his temper face to face before you see him. Let me, if I can, prepare him to hear you, without any angry feeling in his mind towards *me*. Do you object to retire to the next room for a few minutes, in the event of his coming back to the library?"

Mercy's courage instantly rose with the emergency. She refused to leave the two men together.

"Don't think me insensible to your kindness," she said. "If I leave you with Horace, I may expose you to insult. I refuse to do that. What makes you doubt his coming back?"

"His prolonged absence makes me doubt it," Julian replied. "In my belief, the marriage is broken off. He may go as Grace

Roseberry has gone. You may never see him again."

The instant the opinion was uttered, it was practically contradicted by the man himself. Horace opened the library door.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIFTH.

THE CONFESSION.

HE stopped just inside the door. His first look was for Mercy; his second look was for Julian.

"I knew it!" he said, with an assumption of sardonic composure. "If I could only have persuaded Lady Janet to bet, I should have won a hundred pounds." He advanced to Julian, with a sudden change from irony to anger. "Would you like to hear what the bet was?" he asked.

"I should prefer seeing you able to control yourself, in the presence of this lady," Julian answered quietly.

"I offered to lay Lady Janet two hundred pounds to one," Horace proceeded, "that I

should find you here, making love to Miss Roseberry behind my back."

Mercy interfered before Julian could reply.

"If you cannot speak without insulting one of us," she said, "permit me to request that you will *not* address yourself to Mr. Julian Gray."

Horace bowed to her, with a mockery of respect.

"Pray don't alarm yourself—I am pledged to be scrupulously civil to both of you," he replied. "Lady Janet only allowed me to leave her, on condition of my promising to behave with perfect politeness. What else can I do? I have two privileged people to deal with—a parson and a woman. The parson's profession protects him; and the woman's sex protects her. You have got me at a disadvantage, and you both of you know it. I beg to apologise if I have forgotten the clergyman's profession and the lady's sex."

"You have forgotten more than that," said Julian. "You have forgotten that you were born a gentleman and bred a man of honour. So far as I am concerned, I don't ask you to remember that I am a clergyman—I obtrude my profession on nobody—I only ask you to

remember your birth and your breeding. It is quite bad enough to cruelly and unjustly suspect an old friend who has never forgotten what he owes to you and to himself. But it is still more unworthy of you to acknowledge those suspicions in the hearing of a woman whom your own choice has doubly bound you to respect."

He stopped. The two eyed each other for a moment in silence.

It was impossible for Mercy to look at them, as she was looking now, without drawing the inevitable comparison between the manly force and dignity of Julian and the womanish malice and irritability of Horace. A last faithful impulse of loyalty towards the man to whom she had been betrothed impelled her to part them, before Horace had hopelessly degraded himself in her estimation by contrast with Julian.

"You had better wait to speak to me," she said to him, "until we are alone."

"Certainly," Horace answered, with a sneer, "if Mr. Julian Gray will permit it."

Mercy turned to Julian, with a look which said plainly, "Pity us both, and leave us!"

"Do you wish me to go?" he asked.

"Add to all your other kindnesses to me," she answered. "Wait for me in that room."

She pointed to the door that led into the dining-room. Julian hesitated.

"You promise to let me know it, if I can be of the smallest service to you?" he said.

"Yes, yes!" She followed him as he withdrew, and added rapidly in a whisper, "Leave the door ajar!"

He made no answer. As she returned to Horace, he entered the dining-room. The one concession he could make to her he did make. He closed the door so noiselessly that not even her quick hearing could detect that he had shut it.

Mercy spoke to Horace, without waiting to let him speak first.

"I have promised you an explanation of my conduct," she said, in accents that trembled a little in spite of herself. "I am ready to perform my promise."

"I have a question to ask you before you do that," he rejoined. "Can you speak the truth?"

"I am waiting to speak the truth."

"I will give you an opportunity. Are you, or are you not, in love with Julian Gray?"

"You ought to be ashamed to ask the question!"

"Is that your only answer?"

"I have never been unfaithful to you, Horace, even in thought. If I had *not* been true to you, should I feel my position as you see I feel it now?"

He smiled bitterly. "I have my own opinion of your fidelity and of his honour," he said. "You couldn't even send him into the next room, without whispering to him first. Never mind that now. At least you know that Julian Gray is in love with you."

"Mr. Julian Gray has never breathed a word of it to me."

"A man can show a woman that he loves her, without saying it in words."

Mercy's power of endurance began to fail her. Not even Grace Roseberry had spoken more insultingly to her of Julian than Horace was speaking now. "Whoever says that of Mr. Julian Gray, lies!" she answered warmly.

"Then Lady Janet lies," Horace retorted.

"Lady Janet never said it! Lady Janet is incapable of saying it!"

"She may not have said it in so many words; but she never denied it when *I* said it. I reminded her of the time when Julian Gray first heard from me that I was going to marry you: he was so overwhelmed that he was barely capable of being civil to me. Lady Janet was present, and could not deny it. I asked her if she had observed, since then, signs of a confidential understanding between you two. She could not deny the signs. I asked if she had ever found you two together. She could not deny that she had found you together, this very day, under circumstances which justified suspicion. Yes! yes! Look as angry as you like! you don't know what has been going on upstairs. Lady Janet is bent on breaking off our engagement—and Julian Gray is at the bottom of it."

As to Julian, Horace was utterly wrong. But as to Lady Janet, he echoed the warning words which Julian himself had spoken to Mercy. She was staggered, but she still held to her own opinion. "I don't believe it!" she said, firmly.

He advanced a step, and fixed his angry eyes on her searchingly.

"Do you know why Lady Janet sent for me?" he asked.

"No."

"Then I will tell you. Lady Janet is a staunch friend of yours, there is no denying that. She wished to inform me that she had altered her mind about your promised explanation of your conduct. She said, 'Reflection has convinced me that no explanation is required; I have laid my positive commands on my adopted daughter that no explanation shall take place.' Has she done that?"

"Yes."

"Now observe! I waited till she had finished, and then I said, 'What have I to do with this?' Lady Janet has one merit—she speaks out. 'You are to do as I do,' she answered. 'You are to consider that no explanation is required, and you are to consign the whole matter to oblivion, from this time forth.' 'Are you serious?' I asked. 'Quite serious.' 'In that case I have to inform your ladyship that you insist on more than you may suppose—you insist on my breaking my engagement to Miss Roseberry. Either I am

to have the explanation that she has promised me, or I refuse to marry her.' How do you think Lady Janet took that? She shut up her lips, and she spread out her hands, and she looked at me as much as to say, 'Just as you please! Refuse if you like; it's nothing to me!'"

He paused for a moment. Mercy remained silent, on her side: she foresaw what was coming. Mistaken in supposing that Horace had left the house, Julian had, beyond all doubt, been equally in error in concluding that he had been entrapped into breaking off the engagement upstairs.

"Do you understand me, so far?" Horace asked.

"I understand you perfectly."

"I will not trouble you much longer," he resumed. "I said to Lady Janet, 'Be so good as to answer me in plain words. Do you still insist on closing Miss Roseberry's lips?' 'I still insist,' she answered. 'No explanation is required. If you are base enough to suspect your betrothed wife, I am just enough to believe in my adopted daughter.' I replied—and I beg you will give your

best attention to what I am now going to say —I replied to that, 'It is not fair to charge me with suspecting her. I don't understand her confidential relations with Julian Gray, and I don't understand her language and conduct in the presence of the police-officer. I claim it as my right to be satisfied on both those points—in the character of the man who is to marry her.' There was my answer. I spare you all that followed. I only repeat what I said to Lady Janet. She has commanded you to be silent. If you obey her commands, I owe it to myself and I owe it to my family to release you from your engagement. *Choose* between your duty to *Lady Janet* and your duty to Me."

He had mastered his temper at last: he spoke with dignity, and he spoke to the point. His position was unassailable; he claimed nothing but his right.

"My choice was made," Mercy answered, "when I gave you my promise upstairs."

She waited a little; struggling to control herself on the brink of the terrible revelation that was coming. Her eyes dropped before his; her heart beat faster and faster—but she

rallied bravely. With a desperate courage she faced the position. "If you are ready to listen," she went on, "I am ready to tell you why I insisted on having the police-officer sent out of the house."

Horace held up his hand warningly.

"Stop!" he said, "that is not all."

His infatuated jealousy of Julian (fatally misinterpreting her agitation) distrusted her at the very outset. She had limited herself to clearing up the one question of her interference with the officer of justice. The other question of her relations with Julian, she had deliberately passed over. Horace instantly drew his own ungenerous conclusion.

"Let us not misunderstand one another," he said. "The explanation of your conduct in the other room is only one of the explanations which you owe me. You have something else to account for. Let us begin with *that*, if you please."

She looked at him in unaffected surprise.

"What else have I to account for?" she asked.

He again repeated his reply to Lady

"I have told you already," he said. "I don't understand your confidential relations with Julian Gray."

Mercy's colour rose; Mercy's eyes began to brighten.

"Don't return to that!" she cried, with an irrepressible outbreak of disgust. "Don't, for God's sake, make me despise you at such a moment as this!"

His obstinacy only gathered fresh encouragement from that appeal to his better sense.

"I insist on returning to it."

She had resolved to bear anything from him—as her fit punishment for the deception of which she had been guilty. But it was not in womanhood (at the moment when the first words of her confession were trembling on her lips) to endure Horace's unworthy suspicion of her. She rose from her seat and met his eye firmly.

"I refuse to degrade myself, and to degrade Mr. Julian Gray, by answering you," she said.

"Consider what you are doing," he rejoined. "Change your mind, before it is too late!"

"You have had my reply."

Those resolute words, that steady resistance, seemed to infuriate him. He caught her roughly by the arm.

"You are as false as hell!" he cried. "It's all over between you and me!"

The loud, threatening tone in which he had spoken penetrated through the closed door of the dining-room. The door instantly opened. Julian returned to the library.

He had just set foot in the room, when there was a knock at the other door—the door that opened on the hall. One of the men-servants appeared, with a telegraphic message in his hand. Mercy was the first to see it. It was the Matron's answer to the letter which she had sent to the Refuge.

"For Mr. Julian Gray?" she asked.

"Yes, miss."

"Give it to me."

She signed to the man to withdraw, and herself gave the telegram to Julian. "It is addressed to you, at my request," she said. "You will recognise the name of the person who sends it, and you will find a message in it for me."

Horace interfered before Julian could open the telegram.

"Another private understanding between you!" he said. "Give me that telegram."

Julian looked at him with quiet contempt.

"It is directed to Me!" he answered—and opened the envelope.

The message inside was expressed in these terms: "I am as deeply interested in her as you are. Say that I have received her letter, and that I welcome her back to the Refuge with all my heart. I have business this evening in the neighbourhood. I will call for her myself at Mablethorpe House."

The message explained itself. Of her own free will, she had made the expiation complete! Of her own free will, she was going back to the martyrdom of her old life! Bound as he knew himself to be to let no compromising word or action escape him in the presence of Horace, the irrepressible expression of Julian's admiration glowed in his eyes as they rested on Mercy. Horace detected the look. He sprang forward and tried to snatch the telegram out of Julian's hand.

"Give it to me!" he said. "I will have it!"

Julian silently put him back at arm's length.

Maddened with rage, he lifted his hand threateningly. "Give it to me," he repeated between his set teeth, "or it will be the worse for you!"

"Give it to *me!*" said Mercy, suddenly placing herself between them.

Julian gave it. She turned, and offered it to Horace, looking at him with a steady eye, holding it out to him with a steady hand.

"Read it," she said.

Julian's generous nature pitied the man who had insulted him. Julian's great heart only remembered the friend of former times.

"Spare him!" he said to Mercy. "Spare him, if he is not yet prepared!"

She neither answered nor moved. Nothing stirred the horrible torpor of her resignation to her fate. She knew that the time had come.

Julian looked at Horace.

"Don't read it!" he cried. "Hear what she has to say to you first!"

Horace's hand answered him with a contemptuous gesture. Horace's eyes devoured, word by word, the Matron's message.

He looked up when he had read it through. There was a ghastly change in his face as he turned it on Mercy.

She stood between the two men like a statue. The life in her seemed to have died out except in her eyes. Her eyes rested on Horace with a steady, glittering calmness.

The silence was only broken by the low murmuring of Julian's voice. His face was hidden in his hands—he was praying for them.

Horace spoke—laying his finger on the telegram. His voice had changed with the change in his face. The tone was low and trembling: no one would have recognised it as the tone of Horace's voice.

"What does this mean?" he said to Mercy. "It can't be for you?"

"It *is* for me."

"What have You to do with a Refuge?"

Without a change in her face, without a movement in her limbs, she spoke the fatal words.

"I have come from a Refuge, and I am going back to a Refuge. Mr. Horace Holmcroft, I am Mercy Merrick."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SIXTH.

GREAT HEART AND LITTLE HEART.

THERE was a pause.

The moments passed—and not one of the three moved. The moments passed—and not one of the three spoke. Insensibly the words of supplication died away on Julian's lips. Even his energy failed to sustain him, tried as it now was by the crushing oppression of suspense. The first trifling movement which suggested the idea of change, and which so brought with it the first vague sense of relief, came from Mercy. Incapable of sustaining the prolonged effort of standing, she drew back a little, and took a chair. No outward manifestation of emotion escaped her. There

she sat—with the death-like torpor of resignation in her face—waiting her sentence in silence from the man at whom she had hurled the whole terrible confession of the truth in one sentence!

Julian lifted his head as she moved. He looked once more at Horace, and drew back a few steps. There was fear in his face, as he suddenly turned it towards Mercy.

"Speak to him!" he said in a whisper. "Rouse him, before it's too late!"

She moved mechanically in her chair; she looked mechanically at Julian.

"What more have I to say to him?" she asked in faint weary tones. "Did I not tell him everything when I told him my name?"

The natural sound of her voice might have failed to affect Horace. The altered sound of it roused him. He approached Mercy's chair, with a dull surprise in his face, and put his hand in a weak, wavering way on her shoulder. In that position he stood for a while, looking down at her in silence.

The one idea in him that found its way outwards to expression was the idea of Julian. Without moving his hand, without looking

up from Mercy, he spoke for the first time since the shock had fallen on him.

"Where is Julian?" he asked, very quietly.

"I am here, Horace—close by you."

"Will you do me a service?"

"Certainly. How can I help you?"

He considered a little before he replied. His hand left Mercy's shoulder, and went up to his head—then dropped at his side. His next words were spoken in a sadly helpless, bewildered way.

"I have an idea, Julian, that I have been somehow to blame. I said some hard words to you. It was a little while since. I don't clearly remember what it was all about. My temper has been a good deal tried in this house; I have never been used to the sort of thing that goes on here—secrets and mysteries, and hateful, low-lived quarrels. We have no secrets and mysteries at home. And as for quarrels—ridiculous! My mother and my sisters are highly-bred women (you know them); gentlewomen, in the best sense of the word. When I am with *them* I have no anxieties. I am not harassed at home by doubts of who people are, and confusion

about names, and so on. I suspect the contrast weighs a little on my mind, and upsets it. They make me over-suspicious among them here—and it ends in my feeling doubts and fears that I can't get over: doubts about you and fears about myself. I have got a fear about myself now. I want you to help me. Shall I make an apology first?"

"Don't say a word. Tell me what I can do."

He turned his face towards Julian for the first time.

"Just look at me," he said. "Does it strike you that I am at all wrong in my mind? Tell me the truth, old fellow."

"Your nerves are a little shaken, Horace. Nothing more."

He considered again, after that reply; his eyes remaining anxiously fixed on Julian's face.

"My nerves are a little shaken," he repeated. "That is true; I feel they are shaken. I should like, if you don't mind, to make sure that it's no worse. Will you help me to try if my memory is all right?"

"I will do anything you like."

"Ah! you are a good fellow, Julian—and

a clear-headed fellow, too, which is very important just now. Look here! I say it's about a week since the troubles began in this house. Do you say so too?"

"Yes."

"The troubles came in with the coming of a woman from Germany, a stranger to us, who behaved very violently in the dining-room there. Am I right, so far?"

"Quite right."

"The woman carried matters with a high hand. She claimed Colonel Roseberry—no, I wish to be strictly accurate—she claimed *the late* Colonel Roseberry as her father. She told a tiresome story about her having been robbed of her papers and her name by an impostor who had personated her. She said the name of the impostor was Mercy Merrick. And she afterwards put the climax to it all: she pointed to the lady who is engaged to be my wife, and declared that *she* was Mercy Merrick. Tell me again, is that right or wrong?"

Julian answered him as before. He went on, speaking more confidently and more excitedly than he had spoken yet.

"Now attend to this, Julian. I am going to pass from my memory of what happened a week ago to my memory of what happened five minutes since. You were present; I want to know if you heard it too." He paused, and, without taking his eyes off Julian, pointed backwards to Mercy. "There is the lady who is engaged to marry me," he resumed. "Did I, or did I not, hear her say that she had come out of a Refuge, and that she was going back to a Refuge? Did I, or did I not, hear her own to my face that her name was Mercy Merrick? Answer me, Julian. My good friend, answer me for the sake of old times."

His voice faltered as he spoke those imploring words. Under the dull blank of his face there appeared the first signs of emotion slowly forcing its way outwards. The stunned mind was reviving faintly. Julian saw his opportunity of aiding the recovery, and seized it. He took Horace gently by the arm, and pointed to Mercy.

"There is your answer!" he said. "Look! —and pity her."

She had not once interrupted them while they had been speaking: she had changed

her position again, and that was all. There was a writing-table at the side of her chair; her outstretched arms rested on it. Her head had dropped on her arms, and her face was hidden. Julian's judgment had not misled him; the utter self-abandonment of her attitude answered Horace as no human language could have answered him. He looked at her. A quick spasm of pain passed across his face. He turned once more to the faithful friend who had forgiven him. His head fell on Julian's shoulder, and he burst into tears.

Mercy started wildly to her feet and looked at the two men.

"O God!" she cried, "what have I done!"

Julian quieted her by a motion of his hand.

"You have helped me to save him," he said. "Let his tears have their way. Wait."

He put one arm round Horace to support him. The manly tenderness of the action, the complete and noble pardon of past injuries which it implied, touched Mercy to the heart. She went back to her chair. Again shame and sorrow overpowered her, and again she hid her face from view.

Julian led Horace to a seat, and silently

waited by him until he had recovered his self-control. He gratefully took the kind hand that had sustained him; he said simply, almost boyishly, "Thank you, Julian. I am better now."

"Are you composed enough to listen to what is said to you?" Julian asked.

"Yes. Do *you* wish to speak to me?"

Julian left him without immediately replying, and returned to Mercy.

"The time has come," he said. "Tell him all—truly, unreservedly, as you would tell it to me."

She shuddered as he spoke. "Have I not told him enough?" she asked. "Do you want me to break his heart? Look at him! See what I have done already!"

Horace shrank from the ordeal as Mercy shrank from it.

"No! no! I can't listen to it! I daren't listen to it!" he cried, and rose to leave the room.

Julian had taken the good work in hand: he never faltered over it for an instant. Horace had loved her—how dearly, Julian now knew for the first time. The bare pos-

sibility that she might earn her pardon if she was allowed to plead her own cause, was a possibility still left. To let her win on Horace to forgive her, was death to the love that still filled his heart in secret. But he never hesitated. With a resolution which the weaker man was powerless to resist, he took him by the arm and led him back to his place.

"For her sake, and for your sake, you shall not condemn her unheard," he said to Horace firmly. "One temptation to deceive you after another has tried her, and she has resisted them all. With no discovery to fear; with a letter from the benefactress who loves her, commanding her to be silent; with everything that a woman values in this world to lose, if she owns what she has done—*this* woman, for the truth's sake, has spoken the truth. Does she deserve nothing at your hands in return for that? Respect her, Horace—and hear her."

Horace yielded. Julian turned to Mercy.

"You have allowed me to guide you so far," he said. "Will you allow me to guide you still?"

Her eyes sank before his; her bosom rose

and fell rapidly. His influence over her maintained its sway. She bowed her head in speechless submission.

"Tell him," Julian proceeded, in accents of entreaty, not of command, "tell him what your life has been. Tell him how you were tried and tempted, with no friend near to speak the words which might have saved you. And then," he added, raising her from the chair, "let him judge you—if he can!"

He attempted to lead her across the room to the place which Horace occupied. But her submission had its limits. Half way to the place she stopped, and refused to go further. Julian offered her a chair. She declined to take it. Standing, with one hand on the back of the chair, she waited for the word from Horace which would permit her to speak. She was resigned to the ordeal. Her face was calm; her mind was clear. The hardest of all humiliations to endure—the humiliation of acknowledging her name—she had passed through. Nothing remained but to show her gratitude to Julian by acceding to his wishes, and to ask pardon of Horace before they parted for ever. In a little while

the Matron would arrive at the house—and then it would be over.

Unwillingly Horace looked at her. Their eyes met. He broke out suddenly with something of his former violence.

"I can't realise it, even now!" he cried. "*Is* it true that you are not Grace Roseberry? Don't look at me! Say in one word—Yes or No."

She answered him humbly and sadly, "Yes."

"You have done what that woman accused you of doing? Am I to believe that?"

"You are to believe it, sir."

All the weakness of Horace's character disclosed itself when she made her reply.

"Infamous!" he exclaimed. "What excuse can you make for the cruel deception you have practised on me? Too bad! too bad! There can be no excuse for you!"

She accepted his reproaches with unshaken resignation. "I have deserved it!" was all she said to herself, "I have deserved it!"

Julian interposed once more in Mercy's defence.

"Wait till you are sure there is no excuse

for her, Horace," he said quietly. "Grant her justice, if you can grant no more. I leave you together."

He advanced towards the door of the dining-room. Horace's weakness disclosed itself once more.

"Don't leave me alone with her!" he burst out. "The misery of it is more than I can bear!"

Julian looked at Mercy. Her face brightened faintly. That momentary expression of relief told him how truly he would be befriending her if he consented to remain in the room. A position of retirement was offered to him by a recess formed by the central bay window of the library. If he occupied this place they could see or not see that he was present, as their own inclinations might decide them.

"I will stay with you, Horace, as long as you wish me to be here." Having answered in those terms, he stopped as he passed Mercy on his way to the window. His quick and kindly insight told him that he might still be of some service to her. A hint from him might show her the shortest and the easiest

way of making her confession. Delicately and briefly he gave her the hint. "The first time I met you," he said, "I saw that your life had had its troubles. Let us hear how those troubles began."

He withdrew to his place in the recess. For the first time, since the fatal evening when she and Grace Roseberry had met in the French cottage, Mercy Merrick looked back into the purgatory on earth of her past life, and told her sad story simply and truly in these words.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SEVENTH.

MAGDALEN'S APPRENTICESHIP.

"MR. JULIAN GRAY has asked me to tell him, and to tell you, Mr. Holmcroft, how my troubles began. They began before my recollection. They began with my birth.

"My mother (as I have heard her say) ruined her prospects, when she was quite a young girl, by a marriage with one of her father's servants—the groom who rode out with her. She suffered the usual penalty of such conduct as hers. After a short time she and her husband were separated—on the condition of her sacrificing to the man whom she had married the whole of the little fortune that she possessed in her own right.

"Gaining her freedom, my mother had to gain her daily bread next. Her family refused to take her back. She attached herself to a company of strolling players.

"She was earning a bare living in this way, when my father accidentally met with her. He was a man of high rank; proud of his position, and well known in the society of that time for his many accomplishments and his refined tastes. My mother's beauty fascinated him. He took her from the strolling players, and surrounded her with every luxury that a woman could desire in a house of her own.

"I don't know how long they lived together. I only know that my father, at the time of my first recollections, had abandoned her. She had excited his suspicions of her fidelity—suspicions which cruelly wronged her, as she declared to her dying day. I believed her, because she was my mother. But I cannot expect others to do as I did—I can only repeat what she said. My father left her absolutely penniless. He never saw her again; and he refused to go to her, when she sent to him in her last moments on earth.

She was back again among the strolling players when I first remember her. It was not an unhappy time for me. I was the favourite pet and plaything of the poor actors. They taught me to sing and to dance, at an age when other children are just beginning to learn to read. At five years old I was in what is called 'the profession,' and had made my poor little reputation in booths at country fairs. As early as that, Mr. Helmcroft, I had begun to live under an assumed name—the prettiest name they could invent for me—'to look well in the bills.' It was sometimes a hard struggle for us, in bad seasons, to keep body and soul together. Learning to sing and dance in public often meant learning to bear hunger and cold in private, when I was first prenticed to the stage—and yet I have lived to look back on my days with the strolling players as the happiest days of my life!

I was ten years old when the first serious misfortune that I can remember fell upon me. My mother died, worn out in the prime of her life. And not long afterwards the strolling company, brought to the end of its resources by a succession of bad seasons, was broken up.

"I was left on the world a nameless, penniless outcast, with one fatal inheritance. God knows I can speak of it without vanity after what I have gone through!—the inheritance of my mother's beauty.

"My only friends were the poor starving out players. Two of them (husband and wife) obtained engagements in another company, and I was included in the bargain. The new manager by whom I was employed was a drunkard and a brute. One night I made a trifling mistake in the course of the performances—and I was savagely beaten for it. Perhaps I had inherited some of my father's spirit—without, I hope, also inheriting my father's pitiless nature. However that may be, I resolved (no matter what became of me) never again to serve the man who had beaten me. I unlocked the door of our miserable lodging at daybreak the next morning—and, at ten years old, with my little bundle in my hand, I faced the world alone.

"My mother had confided to me, in her last moments, my father's name, and the address of his house in London. 'He may feel some compassion for you,' she said,

'though he feels none for me: try him.' I had a few shillings, the last pitiful remains of my wages, in my pocket, and I was not far from London. But I never went near my father: child as I was, I would have starved and died rather than go to him. I had loved my mother dearly; and I hated the man who had turned his back on her when she lay on her deathbed. It made no difference to Me that he happened to be my father.

"Does this confession revolt you? You look at me, Mr. Holmcroft, as if it did.

"Think a little, sir. Does what I have just said condemn me as a heartless creature, even in my earliest years? What is a father to a child, when the child has never sat on his knee and never had a kiss or a present from him? If we had met in the street, we should not have known each other. Perhaps, in after-days when I was starving in London, I may have begged of my father without knowing it, and he may have thrown his daughter a penny without knowing it either! What is there sacred in the relations between father and child, when they are such relations as these? Even the flowers of the field can-

not grow without light and air to help them. How is a child's love to grow, with nothing to help it?

"My small savings would have been soon exhausted, even if I had been old enough and strong enough to protect them myself. As things were, my few shillings were taken from me by Gipsies. I had no reason to complain. They gave me food and the shelter of their tents; and they made me of use to them in various ways. After a while, hard times came to the Gipsies, as they had come to the strolling players. Some of them were imprisoned, the rest were dispersed. It was the season for hop-gathering at the time. I got employment among the hop-pickers next; and that done, I went to London with my new friends.

"I have no wish to weary and pain you by dwelling on this part of my childhood in detail. It will be enough if I tell you that I ended in begging, under the pretence of selling matches in the street. My mother's legacy got me many a sixpence which my matches would never have charmed out of the pockets of strangers if I had been an ugly child. My face, which was destined to be my greatest

misfortune in after years, was my best friend in those days.

"Is there anything, Mr. Holmcroft, in the life I am now trying to describe which reminds you of a day when we were out walking together, not long since?

"I surprised and offended you, I remember; and it was not possible for me to explain my conduct at the time. Do you recollect the little wandering girl, with the miserable faded nosegay in her hand, who ran after us and begged for a halfpenny? I shocked you by bursting out crying when the child asked us to buy her a bit of bread. Now you know why I was so sorry for her. Now you know why I offended you the next day, by breaking an engagement with your mother, trying (vainly) to trace that child to her home. After what I have confessed, you will admit that my poor little sister in adversity had the first claim on me.

"Let me go on. I am sorry if I have distressed you. Let me go on.

"The forlorn wanderers of the streets have (as I found it) one way, always open to them, of presenting their sufferings to the notice of

their rich and charitable fellow-creatures. They have only to break the law—and they make a public appearance in a court of justice. If the circumstances connected with their offence are of an interesting kind, they gain a second advantage: they are advertised all over England by a report in the newspapers.

"Yes; even *I* have my knowledge of the law. I know that it completely overlooked me so long as I respected it; but on two different occasions it became my best friend when I set it at defiance. My first fortunate offence was committed when I was just twelve years old.

"It was evening time. I was half dead with starvation; the rain was falling; the night was coming on. I begged—openly, loudly, as only a hungry child *can* beg. An old lady in a carriage at a shop-door complained of my importunity. The policeman did his duty. The law gave me a supper and shelter at the station-house that night. I appeared at the police-court, and, questioned by the magistrate, I told my story truly. It was the everyday story of thousands of children like me; but it had one element of

interest in it. I confessed to having had a father (he was then dead) who had been a man of rank; and I owned (just as openly as I owned everything else), that I had never applied to him for help, in resentment of his treatment of my mother. This incident was new, I suppose: it led to the appearance of my 'case' in the newspapers. The reporters further served my interests by describing me as 'pretty and interesting.' Subscriptions were sent to the court. A benevolent married couple, in a respectable sphere of life, visited the workhouse to see me. I produced a favourable impression on them—especially on the wife. I was literally friendless—I had no unwelcome relatives to follow me and claim me. The wife was childless; the husband was a good-natured man. It ended in their taking me away with them to try me in service.

"I have always felt the aspiration, no matter how low I may have fallen, to struggle upwards to a position above me; to rise, in spite of fortune, superior to my lot in life. Perhaps some of my father's pride may be at the root of this restless feeling in me. It

seems to be a part of my nature. It brought me into this house, and it will go with me out of this house. Is it my curse, or my blessing? I am not able to decide.

"On the first night when I slept in my new home, I said to myself: 'They have taken me to be their servant; I will be something more than that; they shall end in taking me for their child.' Before I had been a week in the house I was my mistress's favourite companion, while my master was at his place of business. She was a highly-accomplished woman; greatly her husband's superior in cultivation, and, unfortunately for herself, also his superior in years. The love was all on her side. Excepting certain occasions on which he roused her jealousy, they lived together on sufficiently friendly terms. She was one of the many wives who resign themselves to be disappointed in their husbands, and he was one of the many husbands who never know what their wives really think of them. Her one great happiness was in teaching me. I was eager to learn; I made rapid progress. At my pliant age I soon acquired the refinements of language

and manner which characterised my mistress. It is only the truth to say, that the cultivation which has made me capable of personating a lady was her work.

"For three happy years I lived under that friendly roof. I was between fifteen and sixteen years of age when the fatal inheritance from my mother cast its first shadow on my life. One miserable day the wife's maternal love for me changed, in an instant, to the jealous hatred that never forgives. Can you guess the reason? The husband fell in love with me.

"I was innocent; I was blameless. He owned it himself to the clergyman who was with him at his death. By that time years had passed—it was too late to justify me.

"He was at an age (while I was under his care) when men are usually supposed to regard women with tranquillity, if not with indifference. It had been the habit of years with me, to look on him as my second father. In my innocent ignorance of the feeling which really inspired him, I permitted him to indulge in little paternal familiarities with me, which inflamed his guilty passion. His wife dis-

covered him—not I. No words can describe my astonishment and my horror when the first outbreak of her indignation forced on me the knowledge of the truth. On my knees I declared myself guiltless. On my knees I implored her to do justice to my purity and my youth. At other times the sweetest and the most considerate of women, jealousy had now transformed her to a perfect fury. She accused me of deliberately encouraging him; she declared she would turn me out of the house with her own hands. Like other easy-tempered men, her husband had reserves of anger in him which it was dangerous to provoke. When his wife lifted her hand against me he lost all self-control on his side. He openly told her that life was worth nothing to him, without me; he openly avowed his resolution to go with me when I left the house. The maddened woman seized him by the arm—I saw that, and saw no more. I ran out into the street, panic-stricken. A cab was passing. I got into it, before he could open the house door, and drove to the only place of refuge I could think of—a small shop, kept by the widowed sister of one of

our servants. Here I obtained shelter for the night. The next day he discovered me. He made his vile proposals; he offered me the whole of his fortune; he declared his resolution, say what I might, to return the next day. That night, by help of the good woman who had taken care of me—under cover of the darkness, as if *I* had been to blame!—I was secretly removed to the East End of London, and placed under the charge of a trustworthy person who lived, in a very humble way, by letting lodgings.

"Here, in a little back garret at the top of the house, I was thrown again on the world—at an age when it was doubly perilous for me to be left to my own resources to gain the bread I eat, and the roof that covered me.

"I claim no credit to myself—young as I was; placed as I was between the easy life of Vice and the hard life of Virtue—for acting as I did. The man simply horrified me: my natural impulse was to escape from him. But let it be remembered, before I approach the saddest part of my sad story, that I was an innocent girl, and that I was at least not to blame.

"Forgive me for dwelling as I have done on my early years. I shrink from speaking of the events that are still to come.

"In losing the esteem of my first benefactress, I had, in my friendless position, lost all hold on an honest life—except the one frail hold of needlework. The only reference of which I could now dispose, was the recommendation of me by my landlady to a place of business which largely employed expert needlewomen. It is needless for me to tell you how miserably work of that sort is remunerated—you have read about it in the newspapers. As long as my health lasted, I contrived to live and to keep out of debt. Few girls could have resisted as long as I did the slowly-poisoning influences of crowded workrooms, insufficient nourishment, and almost total privation of exercise. My life as a child had been a life in the open air—it had helped to strengthen a constitution naturally hardy, naturally free from all taint of hereditary disease. But my time came at last. Under the cruel stress laid on it my health gave way. I was struck down by low fever, and sentence was pronounced on me by my

fellow-lodgers: 'Ah, poor thing, *her* troubles will soon be at an end!'

"The prediction might have proved true—I might never have committed the errors and endured the sufferings of after-years—if I had fallen ill in another house.

"But it was my good, or my evil fortune—I dare not say which—to have interested in myself and my sorrows an actress at a suburban theatre, who occupied the room under mine. Except when her stage-duties took her away for two or three hours in the evening, this noble creature never left my bedside. Ill as she could afford it, her purse paid my inevitable expenses while I lay helpless. The landlady, moved by her example, accepted half the weekly rent of my room. The doctor, with the Christian kindness of his profession, would take no fees. All that the tenderest care could accomplish was lavished on me; my youth and my constitution did the rest. I struggled back to life—and then I took up my needle again.

"It may surprise you that I should have failed (having an actress for my dearest friend) to use the means of introduction thus offered

to me to try the stage—especially as my childish training had given me, in some small degree, a familiarity with the Art.

"I had only one motive for shrinking from an appearance at the theatre; but it was strong enough to induce me to submit to any alternative that remained, no matter how hopeless it might be. If I showed myself on the public stage, my discovery by the man from whom I had escaped would be only a question of time. I knew him to be habitually a play-goer, and a subscriber to a theatrical newspaper. I had even heard him speak of the theatre to which my friend was attached, and compare it advantageously with places of amusement of far higher pretensions. Sooner or later, if I joined the company, he would be certain to go and see 'the new actress.' The bare thought of it reconciled me to returning to my needle. Before I was strong enough to endure the atmosphere of the crowded workroom, I obtained permission, as a favour, to resume my occupation at home."

"Surely my choice was the choice of a virtuous girl? And yet, the day when I re-

turned to my needle was the fatal day of my life.

"I had now not only to provide for the wants of the passing hour—I had my debts to pay. It was only to be done by toiling harder than ever, and by living more poorly than ever. I soon paid the penalty, in my weakened state, of leading such a life as this. One evening, my head turned suddenly giddy; my heart throbbed frightfully. I managed to open the window, and, to let the fresh air into the room; and I felt better. But I was not sufficiently recovered to be able to thread my needle. I thought to myself, 'If I go out for half an hour, a little exercise may put me right again.' I had not, as I suppose, been out more than ten minutes, when the attack from which I had suffered in my room was renewed. There was no shop near in which I could take refuge. I tried to ring the bell of the nearest house-door. Before I could reach it, I fainted in the street.

"How long hunger and weakness left me at the mercy of the first stranger who might pass by, it is impossible for me to say.

"When I partially recovered my senses, I

was conscious of being under shelter somewhere, and of having a wine glass containing some cordial drink held to my lips by a man. I managed to swallow—I don't know how little, or how much. The stimulant had a very strange effect on me. Reviving me at first, it ended in stupefying me. I lost my senses once more.

When I next recovered myself, the day was breaking. I was in a bed, in a strange room. A nameless terror seized me. I called out. Three or four women came in, whose faces betrayed even to my inexperienced eyes the shameless infamy of their lives. I started up in the bed; I implored them to tell me where I was and what had happened——

Spare me! I can say no more. Not long since, you heard Miss Roseberry call me an outcast from the streets. Now you know—as God is my judge I am speaking the truth!—now you know what made me an outcast, and in what measure I deserved my disgrace.

Her voice faltered, her resolution failed her, for the first time.

"Give me a few minutes," she said, in low pleading tones. "If I try to go on now, I am afraid I shall cry."

She took the chair which Julian had placed for her, turning her face aside so that neither of the men could see it. One of her hands was pressed over her bosom, the other hung listlessly at her side.

Julian rose from the place that he had occupied. Horace neither moved nor spoke. His head was on his breast; the traces of tears on his cheeks suggested that she had not quite failed to touch his heart. Would he forgive her? Julian passed on, and approached Mercy's chair.

In silence he took the hand which hung at her side. In silence he lifted it to his lips and kissed it, as her brother might have kissed it. She started, but she never looked up. Some strange fear of discovery seemed to possess her. "Horace?" she whispered timidly. Julian made no reply. He went back to his place, and allowed her to think it was Horace.

The sacrifice was immense enough—feeling towards her as he felt—to be worthy of the man who made it.

A few minutes had been all she asked for. In a few minutes she turned towards them again. Her sweet voice was steady once more; her eyes rested softly on Horace as she went on.

"What was it possible for a friendless girl in my position to do, when the full knowledge of the outrage had been revealed to me?

"If I had possessed near and dear relatives to protect and advise me, the wretches into whose hands I had fallen might have felt the penalty of the law. I knew no more of the formalities which set the law in motion than a child. But I had another alternative (you will say). Charitable societies would have received me and helped me, if I had stated my case to them. I knew no more of the charitable societies than I knew of the law. At least, then, I might have gone back to the honest people among whom I had lived? When I recovered my freedom, after an interval of some days, I was ashamed to go back to the honest people. Helplessly and hopelessly, without sin or choice of mine, I drifted, as thousands of other women have

drifted, into the life which set a mark on me for the rest of my days.

"Are you surprised at the ignorance which this confession reveals?

"You, who have your solicitors to inform you of legal remedies, and your newspapers, circulars, and active friends, to sound the praises of charitable institutions continually in your ears—you, who possess these advantages, have no idea of the outer world of ignorance in which your lost fellow-creatures live. They know nothing (unless they are rogues accustomed to prey on society) of your benevolent schemes to help them. The purpose of public charities, and the way to discover and apply to them, ought to be posted at the corner of every street. What do *we* know of public dinners and eloquent sermons and neatly-printed circulars? Every now and then the case of some forlorn creature (generally of a woman), who has committed suicide, within five minutes' walk perhaps of an Institution which would have opened its doors to her, appears in the newspapers, shocks you dreadfully, and is then forgotten again. Take as much pains to make charities and asylums

known among the people *without* money, as are taken to make a new play, a new journal, or a new medicine - known among the people *with* money, and you will save many a lost creature who is perishing now.

"You will forgive and understand me if I say no more of this period of my life. Let me pass to the new incident in my career which brought me for the second time before the public notice in a court of law.

"Sad as my experience has been, it has not taught me to think ill of human nature. I had found kind hearts to feel for me in my former troubles; and I had friends—faithful, self-denying, generous friends—among my sisters in adversity now. One of these poor women (she has gone, I am glad to think, from the world that used her so hardly!) especially attracted my sympathies. She was the gentlest, the most unselfish creature I have ever met with. We lived together like sisters. More than once, in the dark hours when the thought of self-destruction comes to a desperate woman, the image of my poor devoted friend, left to suffer alone, rose in my mind and restrained me. You will

hardly understand it, but even *we* had our happy days. When she or I had a few shillings to spare, we used to offer one another little presents. And, stranger still, we enjoyed our simple pleasure in giving and receiving as keenly as if we had been the most reputable women living!

"One day I took my friend into a shop to buy her a ribbon—only a bow for her dress. She was to choose it, and I was to pay for it, and it was to be the prettiest ribbon that money could buy.

"The shop was full; we had to wait a little before we could be served.

"Next to me, as I stood at the counter with my companion, was a gaudily-dressed woman, looking at some handkerchiefs. The handkerchiefs were finely embroidered, but the smart lady was hard to please. She tumbled them up disdainfully in a heap, and asked for other specimens from the stock in the shop. The man, in clearing the handkerchiefs out of the way, suddenly missed one. He was quite sure of it, from a peculiarity in the embroidery which made the handkerchief especially noticeable. I was poorly dressed,

and I was close to the handkerchiefs. After one look at me, he shouted to the superintendent, 'Shut the door! There is a thief in the shop!'

"The door was closed; the lost handkerchief was vainly sought for on the counter and on the floor. A robbery had been committed; and I was accused of being the thief.

"I will say nothing of what I felt—I will only tell you what happened.

"I was searched, and the handkerchief was discovered on me. The woman who had stood next to me, on finding herself threatened with discovery, had no doubt contrived to slip the stolen handkerchief into my pocket. Only an accomplished thief could have escaped detection in that way, without my knowledge. It was useless, in the face of the facts, to declare my innocence. I had no character to appeal to. My friend tried to speak for me; but what was she? Only a lost woman like myself. My landlady's evidence in favour of my honesty produced no effect; it was against her that she let lodgings to people in my position. I was

prosecuted, and found guilty. The tale of my disgrace is now complete, Mr. Holmcroft. No matter whether I was innocent or not; the shame of it remains—I have been imprisoned for theft.

"The matron of the prison was the next person who took an interest in me. She reported favourably of my behaviour to the authorities; and when I had served my time (as the phrase was among us) she gave me a letter to the kind friend and guardian of my later years—to the lady who is coming here to take me back with her to the Refuge.

"From this time the story of my life is little more than the story of a woman's vain efforts to recover her lost place in the world.

"The matron, on receiving me into the Refuge, frankly acknowledged that there were terrible obstacles in my way. But she saw that I was sincere, and she felt a good woman's sympathy and compassion for me. On my side, I did not shrink from beginning the slow and weary journey back again to a reputable life, from the humblest starting-point—from domestic service. After first earning my new character in the Refuge, I

obtained a trial in a respectable house. I worked hard, and worked uncomplainingly; but my mother's fatal legacy was against me from the first. My personal appearance excited remark; my manners and habits were not the manners and habits of the women among whom my lot was cast. I tried one place after another—always with the same results. Suspicion and jealousy I could endure; but I was defenceless when curiosity assailed me in its turn. Sooner or later inquiry led to discovery. Sometimes the servants threatened to give warning in a body—and I was obliged to go. Sometimes, when there was a young man in the family, scandal pointed at me and at him—and again I was obliged to go. If you care to know it, Miss Roseberry can tell you the story of those sad days. I confided it to her on the memorable night when we met in the French cottage; I have no heart to repeat it now. After a while I wearied of the hopeless struggle. Despair laid its hold on me—I lost all hope in the mercy of God. More than once I walked to one or other of the bridges, and looked over the parapet at the river, and said

to myself, 'Other women have done it: why shouldn't I?'

"You saved me at that time, Mr. Gray—as you have saved me since. I was one of your congregation when you preached in the chapel of the Refuge. You reconciled others besides me to our hard pilgrimage. In their name, and in mine, sir, I thank you.

"I forget how long it was after the bright day when you comforted and sustained us that the war broke out between France and Germany. But I can never forget the evening when the matron sent for me into her own room, and said, 'My dear, your life here is a wasted life. If you have courage enough left to try it, I can give you another chance.'

"I passed through a month of probation in a London hospital. A week after that, I wore the red cross of the Geneva Convention —I was appointed nurse in a French ambulance. When you first saw me, Mr. Holmcroft, I still had my nurse's dress on, hidden from you and from everybody under a grey cloak.

"You know what the next event was; you know how I entered this house.

"I have not tried to make the worst of my trials and troubles in telling you what my life has been. I have honestly described it for what it was when I met with Miss Roseberry —a life without hope. May you never know the temptation that tried me, when the shell struck its victim in the French cottage. There she lay—dead! *Her* name was untainted. *Her* future promised me the reward which had been denied to the honest efforts of a penitent woman. My lost place in the world was offered back to me on the one condition, that I stooped to win it by a fraud. I had no prospect to look forward to; I had no friend near to advise me and to save me; the fairest years of my womanhood had been wasted in the vain struggle to recover my good name. Such was my position when the possibility of personating Miss Roseberry first forced itself on my mind. Impulsively, recklessly—wickedly, if you like—I seized the opportunity, and let you pass me through the German lines under Miss Roseberry's name. Arrived in England, having had time to reflect, I made my first and last effort to draw back before it was too late. I went to the

Refuge, and stopped on the opposite side of the street looking at it. The old hopeless life of irretrievable disgrace confronted me as I fixed my eyes on the familiar door; the horror of returning to that life was more than I could force myself to endure. An empty cab passed me at the moment. The driver held up his hand. In sheer despair I stopped him; and when he said 'Where to?'—in sheer despair again, I answered, 'Mablethorpe House.'

"Of what I have suffered in secret since my own successful deception established me under Lady Janet's care I shall say nothing. Many things which must have surprised you in my conduct are made plain to you by this time. You must have noticed long since that I was not a happy woman. Now you know why.

"My confession is made; my conscience has spoken at last. You are released from your promise to me—you are free. Thank Mr. Julian Gray if I stand here, self-accused of the offence that I have committed, before the man whom I have wronged."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-EIGHTH.

SENTENCE IS PRONOUNCED ON HER.

IT was done. The last tones of her voice died away in silence.

Her eyes still rested on Horace. After hearing what he had heard, could he resist that gentle, pleading look? Would he forgive her? Awhile since, Julian had seen tears on his cheeks, and had believed that he felt for her. Why was he now silent? Was it possible that he only felt for himself?

For the last time—at the crisis of her life—Julian spoke for her. He had never loved her as he loved her at that moment; it tried even his generous nature to plead her cause with Horace against himself. But he had

promised her, without reserve, all the help that her truest friend could offer. Faithfully and manfully he redeemed his promise.

"Horace!" he said.

Horace slowly looked up. Julian rose and approached him.

"She has told you to thank *me*, if her conscience has spoken. Thank the noble nature which answered when I called upon it! Own the priceless value of a woman who can speak the truth. Her heart-felt repentance is a joy in Heaven. Shall it not plead for her on earth? Honour her, if you are a Christian! Feel for her, if you are a man!"

He waited. Horace never answered him.

Mercy's eyes turned tearfully on Julian. *His* heart was the heart that felt for her! *His* words were the words which comforted and pardoned her! When she looked back again at Horace, it was with an effort. His last hold on her was lost. In her inmost mind a thought rose unbidden—a thought which was not to be repressed. "Can I ever have loved this man?"

She advanced a step towards him; it was

not possible, even yet, to completely forget the past. She held out her hand.

He rose, on his side—without looking at her.

"Before we part for ever," she said to him, "will you take my hand as a token that you forgive me?"

He hesitated. He half lifted his hand. The next moment the generous impulse died away in him. In its place came the mean fear of what might happen if he trusted himself to the dangerous fascination of her touch. His hand dropped again at his side; he turned away quickly.

"I can't forgive her!" he said.

With that horrible confession—without even a last look at her—he left the room.

At the moment when he opened the door, Julian's contempt for him burst its way through all restraints.

"Horace," he said, "I pity you!"

As the words escaped him, he looked back at Mercy. She had turned aside from both of them—she had retired to a distant part of the library. The first bitter foretaste of what was in store for her when she faced the world

again had come to her from Horace! The energy which had sustained her thus far, quailed before the dreadful prospect—doubly dreadful to a woman—of obloquy and contempt. Hopeless and helpless, she sank on her knees before a little couch in the darkest corner of the room. "Oh, Christ, have mercy on me!" That was her prayer—no more.

Julian followed her. He waited a little. Then, his kind hand touched her; his friendly voice fell consolingly on her ear.

"Rise, poor wounded heart! Beautiful, purified soul, God's angels rejoice over you! Take your place among the noblest of God's creatures!"

He raised her as he spoke. All her heart went out to him. She caught his hand—she pressed it to her bosom; she pressed it to her lips—then dropped it suddenly, and stood before him trembling like a frightened child.

"Forgive me!" was all she could say. "I was so lost and lonely—and you are so good to me!"

She tried to leave him. It was useless—her strength was gone; she caught at the

head of the couch to support herself. He looked at her. The confession of his love was just rising to his lips—he looked again, and checked it. No; not at that moment; not when she was helpless and ashamed; not when her weakness might make her yield, only to regret it at a later time. The great heart which had spared her and felt for her from the first, spared her and felt for her now.

He, too, left her—but not without a word at parting.

"Don't think of your future life just yet," he said, gently. "I have something to propose when rest and quiet have restored you." He opened the nearest door—the door of the dining-room—and went out.

The servants engaged in completing the decoration of the dinner-table noticed, when "Mr. Julian" entered the room, that his eyes were "brighter than ever." He looked (they remarked) like a man who "expected good news." They were inclined to suspect—though he was certainly rather young for it—that her ladyship's nephew was in a fair way of preferment in the church.

* * * * *

Mercy seated herself on the couch.

There are limits, in the physical organisation of man, to the action of pain. When suffering has reached a given point of intensity, the nervous sensibility becomes incapable of feeling more. The rule of Nature, in this respect, applies not only to sufferers in the body, but to sufferers in the mind as well. Grief, rage, terror, have also their appointed limits. The moral sensibility, like the nervous sensibility, reaches its period of absolute exhaustion, and feels no more.

The capacity for suffering in Mercy had attained its term. Alone in the library, she could feel the physical relief of repose; she could vaguely recall Julian's parting words to her, and sadly wonder what they meant—and she could do no more.

An interval passed; a brief interval of perfect rest.

She recovered herself sufficiently to be able to look at her watch and to estimate the lapse of time that might yet pass before Julian returned to her as he had promised. While her mind was still languidly following

this train of thought, she was disturbed by the ringing of a bell in the hall, used to summon the servant whose duties were connected with that part of the house. In leaving the library, Horace had gone out by the door which led into the hall, and had failed to close it. She plainly heard the bell—and a moment later (more plainly still) she heard Lady Janet's voice!

She started to her feet. Lady Janet's letter was still in the pocket of her apron—the letter which imperatively commanded her to abstain from making the very confession that had just passed her lips! It was near the dinner-hour; and the library was the favourite place in which the mistress of the house and her guests assembled at that time. It was no matter of doubt; it was an absolute certainty that Lady Janet had only stopped in the hall on her way into the room.

The alternative for Mercy lay between instantly leaving the library by the dining-room door—or remaining where she was, at the risk of being sooner or later compelled to own that she had deliberately disobeyed her benefactress. Exhausted by what she

had already suffered, she stood trembling and irresolute, incapable of deciding which alternative she should choose.

Lady Janet's voice, clear and resolute, penetrated into the room. She was reprimanding the servant who had answered the bell.

"Is it your duty in my house to look after the lamps?"

"Yes, my lady."

"And is it my duty to pay you your wages?"

"If you please, my lady."

"Why do I find the light in the hall dim, and the wick of that lamp smoking? I have not failed in my duty to You. Don't let me find you failing again in your duty to Me."

(Never had Lady Janet's voice sounded so sternly in Mercy's ear as it sounded now. If she spoke with that tone of severity to a servant who had neglected a lamp, what had her adopted daughter to expect, when she discovered that her entreaties and her commands had been alike set at defiance?)

Having administered her reprimand, Lady

Janet had not done with the servant yet. She had a question to put to him next.

"Where is Miss Roseberry?"

"In the library, my lady."

Mercy returned to the couch. She could stand no longer; she had not resolution enough left to lift her eyes to the door.

Lady Janet came in more rapidly than usual. She advanced to the couch, and tapped Mercy playfully on the cheek with two of her fingers.

"You lazy child! Not dressed for dinner? Oh, fie, fie!"

Her tone was as playfully affectionate as the action which had accompanied her words. In speechless astonishment Mercy looked up at her.

Always remarkable for the taste and splendour of her dress, Lady Janet had, on this occasion, surpassed herself. There she stood revealed in her grandest velvet, her richest jewelry, her finest lace—with no one to entertain at the dinner-table but the ordinary members of the circle at Mablethorpe House. Noticing this as strange to begin with, Mercy further observed, for the first

time in her experience, that Lady Janet's eyes avoided meeting hers. The old lady took her place companionably on the couch; she ridiculed her "lazy child's" plain dress, without an ornament of any sort on it, with her best grace; she affectionately put her arm round Mercy's waist, and re-arranged with her own hand the disordered locks of Mercy's hair—but the instant Mercy herself looked at her, Lady Janet's eyes discovered something supremely interesting in the familiar objects that surrounded her on the library walls.

How were these changes to be interpreted? To what possible conclusion did they point?

Julian's profounder knowledge of human nature, if Julian had been present, might have found the clue to the mystery. *He* might have surmised (incredible as it was), that Mercy's timidity before Lady Janet was fully reciprocated by Lady Janet's timidity before Mercy. It was even so. The woman whose immovable composure had conquered Grace Roseberry's utmost insolence in the hour of her triumph—the woman who, without once flinching, had faced every other consequence of her resolution to ignore Mercy's

true position in the house—quailed for the first time, when she found herself face to face with the very person for whom she had suffered and sacrificed so much. She had shrunk from the meeting with Mercy, as Mercy had shrunk from the meeting with *her.* The splendour of her dress meant simply that, when other excuses for delaying the meeting down stairs had all been exhausted, the excuse of a long and elaborate toilet had been tried next. Even the moments occupied in reprimanding the servant had been moments seized on as the pretext for another delay. The hasty entrance into the room, the nervous assumption of playfulness in language and manner, the evasive and wandering eyes, were all referable to the same cause. In the presence of others, Lady Janet had successfully silenced the protest of her own inbred delicacy and inbred sense of honour. In the presence of Mercy, whom she loved with a mother's love—in the presence of Mercy, for whom she had stooped to deliberate concealment of the truth—all that was high and noble in the woman's nature rose in her and rebuked her. What will the daughter of my adoption,

the child of my first and last experience of maternal love, think of me, now that I have made myself an accomplice in the fraud of which she is ashamed? How can I look her in the face, when I have not hesitated, out of selfish consideration for my own tranquillity, to forbid that frank avowal of the truth which her finer sense of duty had spontaneously bound her to make? Those were the torturing questions in Lady Janet's mind, while her arm was wound affectionately round Mercy's waist, while her fingers were busying themselves familiarly with the arrangement of Mercy's' hair. Thence, and thence only, sprang the impulse which set her talking, with an uneasy affectation of frivolity, of any topic within the range of conversation—so long as it related to the future, and completely ignored the present and the past.

"The winter here is unendurable," Lady Janet began. "I have been thinking, Grace, about what we had better do next."

Mercy started. Lady Janet had called her "Grace." Lady Janet was still deliberately assuming to be innocent of the faintest suspicion of the truth.

"No!" resumed her ladyship, affecting to misunderstand Mercy's movement, "you are not to go up now and dress. There is no time, and I am quite ready to excuse you. You are a foil to me, my dear. You have reached the perfection of shabbiness. Ah! I remember when I had my whims and fancies too, and when I looked well in anything I wore, just as you do. No more of that. As I was saying, I have been thinking and planning what we are to do. We really can't stay here. Cold one day, and hot the next—what a climate! As for society, what do we lose if we go away? There is no such thing as society now. Assemblies of well-dressed mobs meet at each other's houses, tear each other's clothes, tread on each other's toes. If you are particularly lucky you sit on the staircase, you get a tepid ice, and you hear vapid talk in slang phrases all round you. There is modern society. If we had a good opera it would be something to stay in London for. Look at the programme for the season on that table—promising as much as possible on paper, and performing as little as possible on the stage. The same works, sung by the

same singers year after year, to the same stupid people—in short, the dullest musical evenings in Europe. No! the more I think of it, the more plainly I perceive that there is but one sensible choice before us: we must go abroad. Set that pretty head to work; choose north or south, east or west; it's all the same to me. Where shall we go?"

Mercy looked at her quickly as she put the question.

Lady Janet, more quickly yet, looked away at the programme of the opera-house. Still the same melancholy false pretences! still the same useless and cruel delay! Incapable of enduring the position now forced upon her, Mercy put her hand into the pocket of her apron, and drew from it Lady Janet's letter.

"Will your ladyship forgive me," she began, in faint faltering tones, "if I venture on a painful subject? I hardly dare acknowledge"—— In spite of her resolution to speak out plainly, the memory of past love and past kindness prevailed with her; the next words died away on her lips. She could only hold up the letter.

Lady Janet declined to see the letter. Lady

Janet suddenly became absorbed in the arrangement of her bracelets.

"I know what you daren't acknowledge, you foolish child!" she exclaimed. "You daren't acknowledge that you are tired of this dull house. My dear! I am entirely of your opinion—I am weary of my own magnificence; I long to be living in one snug little room, with one servant to wait on me. I'll tell you what we will do. We will go to Paris in the first place. My excellent Migliore, prince of couriers, shall be the only person in attendance. He shall take a lodging for us in one of the unfashionable quarters of Paris. We will rough it, Grace (to use the slang phrase), merely for a change. We will lead what they call a 'Bohemian life.' I know plenty of writers and painters and actors in Paris—the liveliest society in the world, my dear, until one gets tired of them. We will dine at the restaurant, and go to the play, and drive about in shabby little hired carriages. And when it begins to get monotonous (which it is only too sure to do!) we will spread our wings and fly to Italy, and cheat the winter in that way. There is a plan for you! Migliore is

in town. I will send to him this evening, and we will start to-morrow."

Mercy made another effort.

"I entreat your ladyship to pardon me," she resumed. "I have something serious to say. I am afraid——"

"I understand! You are afraid of crossing the Channel, and you don't like to say so plainly. Pooh! The passage barely lasts two hours; we will shut ourselves up in a private cabin. I will send at once—the courier may be engaged. Ring the bell."

"Lady Janet, I must submit to my hard lot. I cannot hope to associate myself again with any future plans of yours——"

"What! you are afraid of our 'Bohemian life' in Paris? Observe this, Grace! If there is one thing I hate more than another, it is 'an old head on young shoulders.' I say no more. Ring the bell."

"This cannot go on, Lady Janet! No words can say how unworthy I feel of your kindness, how ashamed I am——"

"Upon my honour, my dear, I agree with you. You *ought* to be ashamed, at your age, of making me get up to ring the bell."

Her obstinacy was immovable; she attempted to rise from the couch. But one choice was left to Mercy. She anticipated Lady Janet, and rang the bell.

The man-servant came in. He had his little letter tray in his hand, with a card on it, and a sheet of paper beside the card, which looked like an open letter.

"You know where my courier lives when he is in London?" asked Lady Janet.

"Yes, my lady."

"Send one of the grooms to him on horseback; I am in a hurry. The courier is to come here without fail to-morrow morning—in time for the tidal train to Paris. You understand?"

"Yes, my lady."

"What have you got there? Anything for me?"

"For Miss Roseberry, my lady."

As he answered, the man handed the card and the open letter to Mercy.

"The lady is waiting in the morning-room, miss. She wished me to say she has time to spare, and she will wait for you if you are not ready yet."

Having delivered his message in those terms, he withdrew.

Mercy read the name on the card. The matron had arrived! She looked at the letter next. It appeared to be a printed circular, with some lines in pencil added on the empty page. Printed lines and written lines swam before her eyes. She felt, rather than saw, Lady Janet's attention steadily and suspiciously fixed on her. With the matron's arrival the foredoomed end of the flimsy false pretences and the cruel delays had come.

"A friend of yours, my dear?"

"Yes, Lady Janet."

"Am I acquainted with her?"

"I think not, Lady Janet."

"You appear to be agitated. Does your visitor bring bad news? Is there anything that I can do for you?"

"You can add—immeasurably add, madam—to all your past kindness if you will only bear with me and forgive me."

"Bear with you, and forgive you? I don't understand."

"I will try to explain. Whatever else you

may think of me, Lady Janet, for God's sake don't think me ungrateful!"

Lady Janet held up her hand for silence.

"I dislike explanations," she said, sharply. "Nobody ought to know that better than you. Perhaps the lady's letter will explain for you. Why have you not looked at it yet?"

"I am in great trouble, madam, as you noticed just now——"

"Have you any objection to my knowing who your visitor is?"

"No, Lady Janet."

"Let me look at her card, then."

Mercy gave the matron's card to Lady Janet, as she had given the matron's telegram to Horace.

Lady Janet read the name on the card—considered—decided that it was a name quite unknown to her—and looked next at the address: "Western District Refuge, Milburn Road."

"A lady connected with a Refuge?" she said, speaking to herself; "and calling here by appointment—if I remember the servant's

message? A strange time to choose, if she has come for a subscription!"

She paused. Her brow contracted; her face hardened. A word from her would now have brought the interview to its inevitable end, and she refused to speak the word. To the last moment she persisted in ignoring the truth! Placing the card on the couch at her side, she pointed with her long yellow-white forefinger to the printed letter lying side by side with her own letter on Mercy's lap.

"Do you mean to read it, or not?" she asked.

Mercy lifted her eyes, fast filling with tears, to Lady Janet's face.

"May I beg that your ladyship will read it for me?" she said—and placed the matron's letter in Lady Janet's hand.

It was a printed circular announcing a new development in the charitable work of the Refuge. Subscribers were informed that it had been decided to extend the shelter and the training of the institution (thus far devoted to fallen women alone) so as to include destitute and helpless children found wandering in the streets. The question of the

number of children to be thus rescued and protected was left dependent, as a matter of course, on the bounty of the friends of the Refuge; the cost of the maintenance of each one child being stated at the lowest possible rate. A list of influential persons who had increased their subscriptions so as to cover the cost, and a brief statement of the progress already made with the new work, completed the appeal, and brought the circular to its end.

The lines traced in pencil (in the matron's handwriting) followed on the blank page.

"Your letter tells me, my dear, that you would like—remembering your own childhood—to be employed when you return among us in saving other poor children left helpless on the world. Our circular will inform you that I am able to meet your wishes. My first errand this evening in your neighbourhood was to take charge of a poor child—a little girl—who stands sadly in need of our care. I have ventured to bring her with me, thinking she might help to reconcile you to the coming change in your life. You will find us both waiting to go back with you to the old

house. I write this instead of saying it, hearing from the servant that you are not alone, and being unwilling to intrude myself, as a stranger, on the lady of the house."

Lady Janet read the pencilled lines, as she had read the printed sentences, aloud. Without a word of comment, she laid the letter where she had laid the card; and, rising from her seat, stood for a moment in silence, looking at Mercy. The sudden change in her which the letter had produced—quietly as it had taken place—was terrible to see. On the frowning brow, in the flashing eyes, on the hardened lips, outraged love and outraged pride looked down on the lost woman, and said, as if in words, You have roused us at last.

"If that letter means anything," she began, "it means you are about to leave my house. There can be but one reason for your taking such a step as that."

"It is the only atonement I can make, madam"——

"I see another letter on your lap. Is it *my* letter?"

"Yes."

"Have you read it?"

"I have read it."

"Have you seen Horace Holmcroft?"

"Yes."

"Have you told Horace Holmcroft"——

"Oh, Lady Janet"——

"Don't interrupt me. Have you told Horace Holmcroft what my letter positively forbade you to communicate, either to him or to any living creature? I want no protestations and excuses. Answer me instantly; and answer in one word—Yes, or No."

Not even that haughty language, not even those pitiless tones, could extinguish in Mercy's heart the sacred memories of past kindness and past love. She fell on her knees—her outstretched hands touched Lady Janet's dress. Lady Janet sharply drew her dress away, and sternly repeated her last words.

"Yes? or No?"

"Yes."

She had owned it at last! To this end, Lady Janet had submitted to Grace Roseberry; had offended Horace Holmcroft; had stooped for the first time in her life to con-

cealments and compromises that degraded her. After all that she had sacrificed and suffered—there Mercy knelt at her feet, self-convicted of violating her commands, trampling on her feelings, deserting her house! And who was the woman who had done this? The same woman who had perpetrated the fraud, and who had persisted in the fraud, until her benefactress had descended to become her accomplice. Then, and then only, she had suddenly discovered that it was her sacred duty to tell the truth!

In proud silence, the great lady met the blow that had fallen on her. In proud silence, she turned her back on her adopted daughter, and walked to the door.

Mercy made her last appeal to the generous friend whom she had offended—to the second mother whom she had loved.

"Lady Janet! Lady Janet! Don't leave me without a word. Oh, madam, try to feel for me a little! I am returning to a life of humiliation—the shadow of my old disgrace is falling on me once more. We shall never meet again. Even though I have not deserved

it, let my repentance plead with you! Say you forgive me!"

Lady Janet turned round on the threshold of the door.

"I never forgive ingratitude," she said. "Go back to the Refuge."

The door opened, and closed on her. Mercy was alone again in the room.

Unforgiven by Horace, unforgiven by Lady Janet! She put her hands to her burning head—and tried to think. Oh, for the cool air of the night! Oh, for the friendly shelter of the Refuge! She could feel those sad longings in her; it was impossible to think.

She rang the bell—and shrank back the instant she had done it. Had *she* any right to take that liberty? She ought to have thought of it before she rang. Habit—all habit. How many hundreds of times she had rung the bell at Mablethorpe House!

The servant came in. She amazed the man—she spoke to him so timidly: she even apologised for troubling him!

"I am sorry to disturb you. Will you be so kind as to say to the lady that I am ready for her?"

"Wait to give that message," said a voice behind them, "until you hear the bell rung again."

Mercy looked round in amazement. Julian had returned to the library by the dining-room door.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-NINTH.

THE LAST TRIAL.

THE servant left them together. Mercy spoke first.

"Mr. Gray!" she exclaimed, "why have you delayed my message? If you knew all, you would know that it is far from being a kindness to me to keep me in this house."

He advanced closer to her—surprised by her words, alarmed by her looks.

"Has any one been here in my absence?" he asked.

"Lady Janet has been here in your absence. I can't speak of it—my heart feels crushed—I can bear no more. Let me go!"

Briefly as she had replied, she had said

enough. Julian's knowledge of Lady Janet's character told him what had happened. His face showed plainly that he was disappointed as well as distressed.

"I had hoped to have been with you when you and my aunt met, and to have prevented this," he said. "Believe me, she will atone for all that she may have harshly and hastily done, when she has had time to think. Try not to regret it, if she has made your hard sacrifice harder still. She has only raised you the higher—she has additionally ennobled you and endeared you in my estimation. Forgive me, if I own this in plain words. I cannot control myself—I feel too strongly."

At other times Mercy might have heard the coming avowal in his tones, might have discovered it in his eyes. As it was, her delicate insight was dulled, her fine perception was blunted. She held out her hand to him, feeling a vague conviction that he was kinder to her than ever—and feeling no more.

"I must thank you for the last time," she said. "As long as life is left, my gratitude will be a part of my life. Let me go. While I have some strength left, let me go!"

She tried to leave him, and ring the bell. He held her hand firmly, and drew her closer to him.

"To the Refuge?" he asked.

"Yes!" she said. "Home again!"

"Don't say that!" he exclaimed. "I can't bear to hear it. Don't call the Refuge your home!"

"What else is it? Where else can I go?"

"I have come here to tell you. I said, if you remember, I had something to propose."

She felt the fervent pressure of his hand; she saw the mounting enthusiasm flashing in his eyes. Her weary mind roused itself a little. She began to tremble under the electric influence of his touch.

"Something to propose?" she repeated. "What is there to propose?"

"Let me ask you a question on my side. What have you done to-day?"

"You know what I have done—it is your work," she answered humbly. "Why return to it now?"

"I return to it for the last time; I return to it, with a purpose which you will soon understand. You have abandoned your mar-

riage engagement; you have forfeited Lady Janet's love; you have ruined all your worldly prospects—you are now returning, self-devoted, to a life which you have yourself described as a life without hope. And all this you have done of your own free will—at a time when you are absolutely secure of your position in the house—for the sake of speaking the truth. Now tell me. Is a woman who can make that sacrifice a woman who will prove unworthy of the trust, if a man places in her keeping his honour and his name?"

She understood him at last. She broke away from him with a cry. She stood with her hands clasped, trembling and looking at him.

He gave her no time to think. The words poured from his lips, without conscious will or conscious effort of his own.

"Mercy, from the first moment when I saw you I loved you! You are free; I may own it; I may ask you to be my wife!"

She drew back from him farther and farther, with a wild, imploring gesture of her hand.

"No! no!" she cried. "Think of what you are saying! think of what you would sacrifice! It cannot, must not, be."

His face darkened with a sudden dread. His head fell on his breast. His voice sank so low that she could barely hear it.

"I had forgotten something," he said. "You have reminded me of it."

She ventured back a little nearer to him. "Have I offended you?"

He smiled sadly. "You have enlightened me. I had forgotten that it doesn't follow, because I love you, that you should love me in return. Say that it is so, Mercy—and I leave you."

A faint tinge of colour rose on her face—then left it again paler than ever. Her eyes looked downward timidly under the eager gaze that he fastened on her.

"How *can* I say so?" she answered simply. "Where is the woman in my place whose heart could resist you?"

He eagerly advanced; he held out his arms to her in breathless, speechless joy. She drew back from him once more with a

look that horrified him—a look of blank despair.

"Am *I* fit to be your wife?" she asked. "Must *I* remind you of what you owe to your high position, your spotless integrity, your famous name? Think of all that you have done for me, and then think of the black ingratitude of it if I ruin you for life by consenting to our marriage—if I selfishly, cruelly, wickedly drag you down to the level of a woman like me?"

"I raise you to *my* level when I make you my wife," he answered. "For heaven's sake do me justice! Don't refer me to the world and its opinions. It rests with you, and you alone, to make the misery or the happiness of my life. The world! Good God! what can the world give me in exchange for You?"

She clasped her hands imploringly; the tears flowed fast over her cheeks.

"Oh, have pity on my weakness!" she cried. "Kindest, best of men, help me to do my hard duty towards you! It is *so* hard, after all that I have suffered—when my heart is yearning for peace and happiness and love!" She checked herself, shuddering at

the words that had escaped her. "Remember how Mr. Holmcroft has used me! Remember how Lady Janet has left me! Remember what I have told you of my life! The scorn of every creature you know would strike at you through me. No! no! no! Not a word more. Spare me! pity me! leave me!"

Her voice failed her; sobs choked her utterance. He sprang to her and took her in his arms. She was incapable of resisting him; but there was no yielding in her. Her head lay on his bosom, passive—horribly passive, like the head of a corpse.

"Mercy! My darling! We will go away—we will leave England—we will take refuge among new people, in a new world—I will change my name—I will break with relatives, friends, everybody. Anything, anything, rather than lose you!"

She lifted her head slowly and looked at him.

He suddenly released her; he reeled back like a man staggered by a blow, and dropped into a chair. Before she had uttered a word he saw the terrible resolution in her face—

Death, rather than yield to her own weakness and disgrace him.

She stood with her hands lightly clasped in front of her. Her grand head was raised; her soft grey eyes shone again undimmed by tears. The storm of emotion had swept over her and had passed away. A sad tranquillity was in her face; a gentle resignation was in her voice. The calm of a martyr was the calm that confronted him as she spoke her last words.

"A woman who has lived my life, a woman who has suffered what I have suffered, may love you—as *I* love you—but she must not be your wife. *That* place is too high above her. Any other place is too far below her and below you." She paused, and advancing to the bell gave the signal for her departure. That done, she slowly retraced her steps until she stood at Julian's side.

Tenderly she lifted his head, and laid it for a moment on her bosom. Silently she stooped, and touched his forehead with her lips. All the gratitude that filled her heart and all the sacrifice that rent it, were in those two actions—so modestly, so tenderly per-

formed! As the last lingering pressure of her fingers left him, Julian burst into tears.

The servant answered the bell. At the moment when he opened the door a woman's voice was audible, in the hall, speaking to him.

"Let the child go in," the voice said. "I will wait here."

The child appeared—the same forlorn little creature who had reminded Mercy of her own early years, on the day when she and Horace Holmcroft had been out for their walk.

There was no beauty in *this* child; no halo of romance brightened the commonplace horror of her story. She came cringing into the room, staring stupidly at the magnificence all round her—the daughter of the London streets! the pet creation of the laws of political economy! the savage and terrible product of a worn-out system of government and of a civilisation rotten to its core! Cleaned for the first time in her life; fed sufficiently for the first time in her life; dressed in clothes instead of rags for the first time in her life, Mercy's sister in adversity

crept fearfully over the beautiful carpet, and stopped wonderstruck before the marbles of an inlaid table—a blot of mud on the splendour of the room.

Mercy turned from Julian to meet the child. The woman's heart, hungering in its horrible isolation for something that it might harmlessly love, welcomed the rescued waif of the streets as a consolation sent from God. She caught the stupefied little creature up in her arms. "Kiss me!" she whispered in the reckless agony of the moment. "Call me sister!" The child stared vacantly. Sister meant nothing to her mind but an older girl who was strong enough to beat her.

She put the child down again, and turned for a last look at the man whose happiness she had wrecked—in pity to *him*.

He had never moved. His head was down; his face was hidden. She went back to him a few steps.

"The others have gone from me without one kind word. Can *you* forgive me?"

He held out his hand to her without looking up. Sorely as she had wounded him, his generous nature understood her. True

to her from the first, *he* was true to her still.

"God bless, and comfort you," he said in broken tones. "The earth holds no nobler woman than you."

She knelt and kissed the kind hand that pressed hers for the last time. "It doesn't end with this world," she whispered, "there is a better world to come!" Then she rose, and went back to the child. Hand-in-hand, the two citizens of the Government of God —outcasts of the Government of Man— passed slowly down the length of the room. Then, out into the hall. Then, out into the night. The heavy clang of the closing door tolled the knell of their departure. They were gone.

But the orderly routine of the house— inexorable as death—pursued its appointed course. As the clock struck the hour the dinner-bell rang. An interval of a minute passed, and marked the limit of delay. The butler appeared at the dining-room door.

"Dinner is served, sir."

Julian looked up. The empty room met his eyes. Something white lay on the carpet

close by him. It was her handkerchief—wet with her tears. He took it up, and pressed it to his lips. Was that to be the last of her? Had she left him for ever?

The native energy of the man, arming itself with all the might of his love, kindled in him again. No! While life was in him, while time was before him, there was the hope of winning her yet!

He turned to the servant, reckless of what his face might betray.

"Where is Lady Janet?"

"In the dining-room, sir."

He reflected for a moment. His own influence had failed. Through what other influence could he now hope to reach her? As the question crossed his mind, the light broke on him. He saw the way back to her—through the influence of Lady Janet.

"Her ladyship is waiting, sir."

Julian entered the dining-room.

THE END OF THE SECOND SCENE.

EPILOGUE:

CONTAINING

SELECTIONS FROM THE CORRESPONDENCE OF MISS GRACE ROSEBERRY AND MR. HORACE HOLMCROFT;

TO WHICH ARE ADDED

EXTRACTS FROM THE DIARY OF THE REVEREND JULIAN GRAY.

I.

From MR. HORACE HOLMCROFT *to* MISS GRACE ROSEBERRY.

"I HASTEN to thank you, dear Miss Roseberry, for your very kind letter, received by yesterday's mail from Canada. Believe me, I appreciate your generous readiness to pardon and forget what I so rudely said to you at a time when the arts of an adventuress had blinded me to the truth. In the grace which has forgiven me I recognise the inbred sense of justice of a true lady. Birth and breeding can never fail to assert themselves; I believe in them, thank God, more firmly than ever.

"You ask me to keep you informed of the progress of Julian Gray's infatuation, and of

the course of conduct pursued towards him by Mercy Merrick.

"If you had not favoured me by explaining your object, I might have felt some surprise at receiving, from a lady in your position, such a request as this. But the motives by which you describe yourself as being actuated are beyond dispute. The existence of Society, as you truly say, is threatened by the present lamentable prevalence of Liberal ideas throughout the length and breadth of the land. We can only hope to protect ourselves against impostors interested in gaining a position among persons of our rank, by becoming in some sort (unpleasant as it may be) familiar with the arts by which imposture too frequently succeeds. If we wish to know to what daring lengths cunning can go, to what pitiable self-delusion credulity can consent, we must watch the proceedings—even while we shrink from them—of a Mercy Merrick and a Julian Gray.

"In taking up my narrative again, where my last letter left off, I must venture to set you right on one point.

"Certain expressions which have escaped

your pen suggest to me that you blame Julian Gray as the cause of Lady Janet's regretable visit to the Refuge, the day after Mercy Merrick had left her house. This is not quite correct. Julian, as you will presently see, has enough to answer for, without being held responsible for errors of judgment in which he has had no share. Lady Janet (as she herself told me) went to the Refuge of her own free will, to ask Mercy Merrick's pardon for the language which she had used on the previous day. 'I passed a night of such misery as no words can describe'—this, I assure you, is what her ladyship really said to me—'thinking over what my vile pride and selfishness and obstinacy had made me say and do. I would have gone down on my knees to beg her pardon if she would have let me. My first happy moment was when I won her consent to come and visit me sometimes at Mablethorpe House.'

"You will, I am sure, agree with me that such extravagance as this is to be pitied rather than blamed. How sad to see the decay of the faculties with advancing age! It is a matter of grave anxiety to consider how much

longer poor Lady Janet can be trusted to manage her own affairs. I shall take an opportunity of touching on the matter delicately when I next see her lawyer.

"I am straying from my subject. And—is it not strange?—I am writing to you as confidentially as if we were old friends.

"To return to Julian Gray. Innocent of instigating his aunt's first visit to the Refuge, he is guilty of having induced her to go there for the second time, the day after I had despatched my last letter to you. Lady Janet's object on this occasion was neither more nor less than to plead her nephew's cause as humble suitor for the hand of Mercy Merrick. Imagine the descendant of one of the oldest families in England inviting an adventuress in a Refuge to honour a clergyman of the Church of England by becoming his wife! In what times do we live! My dear mother shed tears of shame when she heard of it. How you would love and admire my mother!

"I dined at Mablethorpe House by previous appointment, on the day when Lady Janet returned from her degrading errand.

"'Well?' I said, waiting of course until the servant was out of the room.

"'Well,' Lady Janet answered, 'Julian was quite right.'

"'Quite right in what?'

"'In saying that the earth holds no nobler woman than Mercy Merrick.'

"'Has she refused him again?'

"'She has refused him again.'

"'Thank God!' I felt it fervently, and I said it fervently. Lady Janet laid down her knife and fork, and fixed one of her fierce looks on me.

"'It may not be your fault, Horace,' she said, 'if your nature is incapable of comprehending what is great and generous in other natures higher than yours. But the least you can do is to distrust your own capacity of appreciation. For the future keep your opinions (on questions which you don't understand) modestly to yourself. I have a tenderness for you for your father's sake; and I take the most favourable view of your conduct towards Mercy Merrick. I humanely consider it the conduct of a fool.' (Her own words, Miss Roseberry. I assure you once

more, her own words.) 'But don't trespass too far on my indulgence—don't insinuate again that a woman who is good enough (if she died this night) to go to Heaven, is *not* good enough to be my nephew's wife.'

"I expressed to you my conviction a little way back, that it was doubtful whether poor Lady Janet would be much longer competent to manage her own affairs. Perhaps you thought me hasty, then? What do you think, now?

"It was of course useless to reply seriously to the extraordinary reprimand that I had received. Besides, I was really shocked by a decay of principle which proceeded but too plainly from decay of the mental powers. I made a soothing and respectful reply; and I was favoured in return with some account of what had really happened at the Refuge. My mother and my sisters were disgusted when I repeated the particulars to them. You will be disgusted too.

"The interesting penitent (expecting Lady Janet's visit), was, of course, discovered in a touching domestic position! She had a foundling baby asleep, on her lap; and she was

teaching the alphabet to an ugly little vagabond girl whose acquaintance she had first made in the street. Just the sort of artful *tableau vivant* to impose on an old lady—was it not?

"You will understand what followed, when Lady Janet opened her matrimonial negotiation. Having perfected herself in her part, Mercy Merrick, to do her justice, was not the woman to play it badly. The most magnanimous sentiments flowed from her lips. She declared that her future life was devoted to acts of charity; typified of course by the foundling infant and the ugly little girl. However she might personally suffer, whatever might be the sacrifice of her own feelings —observe how artfully this was put, to insinuate that she was herself in love with him!— she could not accept from Mr. Julian Gray an honour of which she was unworthy. Her gratitude to him and her interest in him alike forbade her to compromise his brilliant future, by consenting to a marriage which would degrade him in the estimation of all his friends. She thanked him (with tears); she thanked Lady Janet (with more tears); but

she dare not, in the interests of *his* honour and *his* happiness, accept the hand that he offered to her. God bless and comfort him; and God help her to bear with her hard lot!

"The object of this contemptible comedy is plain enough to my mind. She is simply holding off (Julian, as you know, is a poor man), until the influence of Lady Janet's persuasion is backed by the opening of Lady Janet's purse. In one word—Settlements! But for the profanity of the woman's language, and the really lamentable credulity of the poor old lady, the whole thing would make a fit subject for a burlesque.

"But the saddest part of the story is still to come.

"In due course of time, the lady's decision was communicated to Julian Gray. He took leave of his senses on the spot. Can you believe it?—he has resigned his curacy! At a time when the church is thronged every Sunday to hear him preach, this madman shuts the door and walks out of the pulpit. Even Lady Janet was not far enough gone in folly to abet him in this. She remonstrated, like the rest of his friends. Per-

fectly useless! He had but one answer to everything they could say: 'My career is closed.' What stuff!

"You will ask, naturally enough, what this perverse man is going to do next. I don't scruple to say that he is bent on committing suicide. Pray do not be alarmed! There is no fear of the pistol, the rope, or the river. Julian is simply courting death—within the limits of the law.

"This is strong language, I know. You shall hear what the facts are, and judge for yourself.

"Having resigned his curacy, his next proceeding was to offer his services, as volunteer, to a new missionary enterprise on the west coast of Africa. The persons at the head of the Mission proved, most fortunately, to have a proper sense of their duty. Expressing their conviction of the value of Julian's assistance in the most handsome terms, they made it nevertheless a condition of entertaining his proposal that he should submit to examination by a competent medical man. After some hesitation he consented to this. The doctor's report was conclusive.

In Julian's present state of health the climate of West Africa would in all probability kill him in three months' time.

"Foiled in his first attempt, he addressed himself next to a London Mission. Here, it was impossible to raise the question of climate; and here, I grieve to say, he has succeeded.

"He is now working—in other words, he is now deliberately risking his life—in the Mission to Green Anchor Fields. The district known by this name is situated in a remote part of London, near the Thames. It is notoriously infested by the most desperate and degraded set of wretches in the whole metropolitan population; and it is so thickly inhabited that it is hardly ever completely free from epidemic disease. In this horrible place, and among these dangerous people, Julian is now employing himself from morning to night. None of his old friends ever see him. Since he joined the Mission he has not even called on Lady Janet Roy.

"My pledge is redeemed—the facts are before you. Am I wrong in taking my gloomy view of the prospect? I cannot forget that this

unhappy man was once my friend; and I really see no hope for him in the future. Deliberately self-exposed to the violence of ruffians and the outbreak of disease, who is to extricate him from his shocking position? The one person who can do it is the person whose association with him would be his ruin—Mercy Merrick. Heaven only knows what disasters it may be my painful duty to communicate to you in my next letter!

"You are so kind as to ask me to tell you something about myself and my plans.

"I have very little to say on either head. After what I have suffered—my feelings trampled on, my confidence betrayed—I am as yet hardly capable of deciding what I shall do. Returning to my old profession—to the army—is out of the question, in these levelling days, when any obscure person who can pass an examination may call himself my brother officer, and may one day perhaps command me as my superior in rank. If I think of any career, it is the career of diplomacy. Birth and breeding have not quite disappeared as essential qualifications in *that* branch of the

public service. But I have decided nothing as yet.

"My mother and sisters, in the event of your returning to England, desire me to say that it will afford them the greatest pleasure to make your acquaintance. Sympathising with me, they do not forget what you too have suffered. A warm welcome awaits you when you pay your first visit at our house.

"Most truly yours,

"HORACE HOLMCROFT."

II.

From MISS GRACE ROSEBERRY *to* MR. HORACE HOLMCROFT.

"DEAR MR. HOLMCROFT,—

"I snatch a few moments from my other avocations to thank you for your most interesting and delightful letter. How well you describe, how accurately you judge! If Literature stood a little higher as a profession, I should almost advise you—but no! if you entered Literature, how could *you* associate with the people whom you would be likely to meet?

"Between ourselves, I always thought Mr. Julian Gray an over-rated man. I will not say he has justified my opinion. I will only say I pity him. But, dear Mr. Holmcroft,

how can you, with your sound judgment, place the sad alternatives now before him on the same level? To die in Green Anchor Fields, or to fall into the clutches of that vile wretch —is there any comparison between the two? Better a thousand times die at the post of duty than marry Mercy Merrick.

"As I have written the creature's name, I may add—so as to have all the sooner done with the subject—that I shall look with anxiety for your next letter. Do not suppose that I feel the smallest curiosity about this degraded and designing woman. My interest in her is purely religious. To persons of my devout turn of mind, she is an awful warning. When I feel Satan near me—it will be *such* a means of grace to think of Mercy Merrick!

"Poor Lady Janet! I noticed those signs of mental decay to which you so feelingly allude, at the last interview I had with her in Mablethorpe House. If you can find an opportunity, will you say that I wish her well, here and hereafter? and will you please add, that I do not omit to remember her in my prayers?

"There is just a chance of my visiting

England towards the close of the autumn. My fortunes have changed since I wrote last. I have been received as reader and companion by a lady who is the wife of one of our high judicial functionaries in this part of the world. I do not take much interest in *him;* he is what they call 'a self-made man.' His wife is charming. Besides being a person of highly intellectual tastes, she is greatly her husband's superior—as you will understand when I tell you that she is related to the Gommerys of Pommery; *not* the Pommerys of Gommery, who (as your knowledge of our old families will inform you) only claim kindred with the younger branch of that ancient race.

"In the elegant and improving companionship which I now enjoy, I should feel quite happy but for one drawback. The climate of Canada is not favourable to my kind patroness; and her medical advisers recommend her to winter in London. In this event, I am to have the privilege of accompanying her. Is it necessary to add that my first visit will be paid at your house? I feel already united by sympathy to your mother and your sisters. There is a sort of freemasonry among gentle-

women, is there not? With best thanks and remembrances, and many delightful anticipations of your next letter, believe me, dear Mr. Holmcroft,

"Truly yours,

"GRACE ROSEBERRY."

III.

From MR. HORACE HOLMCROFT *to* MISS GRACE ROSEBERRY.

"MY DEAR MISS ROSEBERRY,

"Pray excuse my long silence. I have waited for mail after mail, in the hope of being able to send you some good news at last. It is useless to wait longer. My worst forebodings have been realised: my painful duty compels me to write a letter which will surprise and shock you.

"Let me describe events in their order as they happened. In this way I may hope to gradually prepare your mind for what is to come.

"About three weeks after I wrote to you last, Julian Gray paid the penalty of his

headlong rashness. I do not mean that he suffered any actual violence at the hands of the people among whom he had cast his lot. On the contrary, he succeeded, incredible as it may appear, in producing a favourable impression on the ruffians about him. As I understand it, they began by respecting his courage in venturing among them alone; and they ended in discovering that he was really interested in promoting their welfare. It is to the other peril, indicated in my last letter, that he has fallen a victim—the peril of disease. Not long after he began his labours in the district, fever broke out. We only heard that Julian had been struck down by the epidemic when it was too late to remove him from the lodging that he occupied in the neighbourhood. I made inquiries personally the moment the news reached us. The doctor in attendance refused to answer for his life.

"In this alarming state of things, poor Lady Janet, impulsive and unreasonable as usual, insisted on leaving Mablethorpe House, and taking up her residence near her nephew.

"Finding it impossible to persuade her of

the folly of removing from home and its comforts at her age, I felt it my duty to accompany her. We found accommodation (such as it was) in a riverside inn, used by ship-captains and commercial travellers. I took it on myself to provide the best medical assistance; Lady Janet's insane prejudices against doctors impelling her to leave this important part of the arrangements entirely in my hands.

"It is needless to weary you by entering into details on the subject of Julian's illness.

"The fever pursued the ordinary course, and was characterised by the usual intervals of delirium and exhaustion succeeding each other. Subsequent events, which it is, unfortunately, necessary to relate to you, leave me no choice but to dwell (as briefly as possible) on the painful subject of the delirium. In other cases, the wanderings of fever-stricken people present, I am told, a certain variety of range. In Julian's case they were limited to one topic. He talked incessantly of Mercy Merrick. His invariable petition to his medical attendants entreated them to send for her to nurse him. Day and night

that one idea was in his mind, and that one name on his lips.

"The doctors naturally made inquiries as to this absent person. I was obliged (in confidence) to state the circumstances to them plainly.

"The eminent physician whom I had called in to superintend the treatment, behaved admirably. Though he has risen from the lower order of the people, he has, strange to say, the instincts of a gentleman. He thoroughly understood our trying position, and felt all the importance of preventing such a person as Mercy Merrick from seizing the opportunity of intruding herself at the bedside. A soothing prescription (I have his own authority for saying it) was all that was required to meet the patient's case. The local doctor, on the other hand, a young man (and evidently a red-hot Radical), proved to be obstinate, and, considering his position, insolent as well. 'I have nothing to do with the lady's character and with your opinion of it,' he said to me. 'I have only, to the best of my judgment, to point out to you the likeliest means of saving the patient's life. Our

art is at the end of its resources. Send for Mercy Merrick, no matter who she is or what she is. There is just a chance—especially if she proves to be a sensible person and a good nurse—that he may astonish you all by recognising her. In that case only, his recovery is probable. If you persist in disregarding his entreaties, if you let the delirium go on for four and twenty hours more, he is a dead man.'

"Lady Janet was, most unluckily, present when this impudent opinion was delivered at the bedside.

"Need I tell you the sequel? Called upon to choose between the course indicated by a physician who is making his five thousand a year, and who is certain of the next medical baronetcy, and the advice volunteered by an obscure general practitioner at the East End of London, who is not making his five hundred a year—need I stop to inform you of her ladyship's decision? You know her; and you will only too well understand that her next proceeding was to pay a third visit to the Refuge.

"Two hours later—I give you my word of

honour I am not exaggerating—Mercy Merrick was established at Julian's bedside.

"The excuse, of course, was that it was her duty not to let any private scruples of her own stand in the way, when a medical authority had declared that she might save the patient's life. You will not be surprised to hear that I withdrew from the scene. The physician followed my example—after having written his soothing prescription, and having been grossly insulted by the local practitioner's refusal to make use of it. I went back in the doctor's carriage. He spoke most feelingly and properly. Without giving any positive opinion, I could see that he had abandoned all hope of Julian's recovery. 'We are in the hands of Providence, Mr. Holmcroft'—those were his last words as he set me down at my mother's door.

"I have hardly the heart to go on. If I studied my own wishes, I should feel inclined to stop here.

"Let me at least hasten to the end. In two or three days' time, I received my first intelligence of the patient and his nurse. Lady Janet informed me that he had recog-

nised her. When I heard this, I felt prepared for what was to come. The next report announced that he was gaining strength, and the next that he was out of danger. Upon this, Lady Janet returned to Mablethorpe House. I called there a week ago—and heard that he had been removed to the seaside. I called yesterday—and received the latest information from her ladyship's own lips. My pen almost refuses to write it. Mercy Merrick has consented to marry him!

"An Outrage on Society—that is how my mother and my sisters view it; that is how *you* will view it too. My mother has herself struck Julian's name off her invitation list. The servants have their orders if he presumes to call: 'Not at home.'

"I am unhappily only too certain that I am correct, in writing to you of this disgraceful marriage as of a settled thing. Lady Janet went the length of showing me the letters—one from Julian; the other from the woman herself. Fancy Mercy Merrick in correspondence with Lady Janet Roy!—addressing her as 'My dear Lady Janet,' and signing, 'Yours affectionately'!

"I had not the patience to read either of the letters through. Julian's tone is the tone of a Socialist; in my opinion, his bishop ought to be informed of it. As for *her*, she plays her part just as cleverly with her pen as she played it with her tongue. 'I cannot disguise from myself that I am wrong in yielding.' . . . 'Sad forebodings fill my mind when I think of the future.' . . . 'I feel as if the first contemptuous look that is cast at my husband will destroy *my* happiness though it may not disturb *him*.' . . . 'As long as I was parted from him, I could control my own weakness; I could accept my hard lot. But how can I resist him, after having watched for weeks at his bedside; after having seen his first smile, and heard his first grateful words to me while I was slowly helping him back to life?'

"There is the tone which she takes through four closely written pages of nauseous humility and clap-trap sentiment! It is enough to make one despise women. Thank God, there is the contrast at hand, to remind me of what is due to the better few among the sex. I feel that my mother

and my sisters are doubly precious to me now. May I add, on the side of consolation, that I prize with hardly inferior gratitude, the privilege of corresponding with *you?*

"Farewell, for the present. I am too rudely shaken in my most cherished convictions, I am too depressed and disheartened, to write more. All good wishes go with you, dear Miss Roseberry, until we meet.

"Most truly yours,

"HORACE HOLMCROFT."

IV.

Extracts from the DIARY *of* THE REVEREND JULIAN GRAY.

FIRST EXTRACT.

. . . "A MONTH to-day since we were married! I have only one thing to say: I would cheerfully go through all that I have suffered, to live this one month over again. I never knew what happiness was until now. And better still, I have persuaded Mercy that it is all her doing. I have scattered her misgivings to the winds; she is obliged to submit to evidence, and to own that she *can* make the happiness of my life.

"We go back to London to-morrow. She regrets leaving the tranquil retirement of this remote seaside place—she dreads change. I

care nothing for it. It is all one to me where I go, so long as my wife is with me.

SECOND EXTRACT.

"The first cloud has risen. I entered the room unexpectedly just now, and found her in tears.

"With considerable difficulty I persuaded her to tell me what had happened. Are there any limits to the mischief that can be done by the tongue of a foolish woman? The landlady at my lodgings is the woman, in this case. Having no decided plans for the future as yet, we returned (most unfortunately, as the event has proved) to the rooms in London which I inhabited in my bachelor days. They are still mine for six weeks to come, and Mercy was unwilling to let me incur the expense of taking her to an hotel. At breakfast this morning, I rashly congratulated myself (in my wife's hearing) on finding that a much smaller collection than usual of letters and cards had accumulated in my absence. Breakfast over, I was obliged to go out. Painfully sensitive, poor thing, to any change in my experience of the little world around me which it is pos-

sible to connect with the event of my marriage, Mercy questioned the landlady, in my absence, about the diminished number of my visitors and my correspondents. The woman seized the opportunity of gossiping about me and my affairs, and my wife's quick perception drew the right conclusion unerringly. My marriage has decided certain wise heads of families on discontinuing their social relations with me. The facts, unfortunately, speak for themselves. People who, in former years, habitually called upon me and invited me—or who, in the event of my absence, habitually wrote to me at this season—have abstained with a remarkable unanimity from calling, inviting, or writing now.

"It would have been sheer waste of time—to say nothing of its also implying a want of confidence in my wife—if I had attempted to set things right by disputing Mercy's conclusion. I could only satisfy her that not so much as the shadow of disappointment or mortification rested on *my* mind. In this way I have, to some extent, succeeded in composing my poor darling. But the wound has been inflicted, and the wound is felt. There

is no disguising *that* result. I must face it boldly.

"Trifling as this incident is in my estimation, it has decided me on one point already. In shaping my future course, I am now resolved to act on my own convictions—in preference to taking the well-meant advice of such friends as are still left to me.

"Most of my success in life has been gained in the pulpit. I am what is termed a popular preacher—but I have never, in my secret self, felt any exultation in my own notoriety, or any extraordinary respect for the means by which it has been won. In the first place, I have a very low idea of the importance of oratory as an intellectual accomplishment. There is no other art in which the conditions of success are so easy of attainment; there is no other art in the practice of which so much that is purely superficial passes itself off habitually for something that claims to be profound. Then again, how poor it is in the results which it achieves! Take my own case. How often (for example) have I thundered with all my heart and soul against the wicked extravagance of dress amongst

women—against their filthy false hair, and their nauseous powders and paints! How often (to take another example) have I denounced the mercenary and material spirit of the age, the habitual corruptions and dishonesties of commerce, in high places and in low! What good have I done? I have delighted the very people whom it was my object to rebuke. 'What a charming sermon!' 'More eloquent than ever!' 'I used to dread the sermon at the other church—do you know I quite look forward to it now?' That is the effect I produce on Sunday. On Monday the women are off to the milliners to spend more money than ever; the City men are off to business to make more money than ever—while my grocer, loud in my praises in his Sunday coat, turns up his week-day sleeves and adulterates his favourite preacher's sugar as cheerfully as usual!

"I have often, in past years, felt the objections to pursuing my career which are here indicated. They were bitterly present to my mind when I resigned my curacy, and they strongly influence me now.

"I am weary of my cheaply-won success in

the pulpit. I am weary of society as I find it in my time. I felt some respect for myself, and some heart and hope in my work, among the miserable wretches in Green Anchor Fields. But I cannot, and must not, return among them: I have no right, *now*, to trifle with my health and my life. I must go back to my preaching, or I must leave England. Among a primitive people; away from the cities—in the far and fertile West of the great American continent—I might live happily with my wife, and do good among my neighbours; secure of providing for our wants out of the modest little income which is almost useless to me here. In the life which I thus picture to myself I see love, peace, health, and duties and occupations that are worthy of a Christian man. What prospect is before me, if I take the advice of my friends and stay here? Work of which I am weary, because I have long since ceased to respect it; petty malice that strikes at me through my wife, and mortifies and humiliates her, turn where she may. If I had only myself to think of, I might defy the worst that malice can do. But I have Mercy to think of—Mercy, whom I

love better than my own life! Women live, poor things, in the opinions of others. I have had one warning already of what my wife is likely to suffer at the hands of my 'friends'—Heaven forgive me for misusing the word! Shall I deliberately expose her to fresh mortifications?—and this for the sake of returning to a career the rewards of which I no longer prize? No! We will both be happy—we will both be free! God is merciful; Nature is kind; Love is true, in the New World as well as the Old. To the New World we will go!"

THIRD EXTRACT.

"I hardly know whether I have done right or wrong. I mentioned yesterday to Lady Janet the cold reception of me on my return to London, and the painful sense of it felt by my wife.

"My aunt looks at the matter from her own peculiar point of view, and makes light of it accordingly. 'You never did, and never will, understand Society, Julian,' said her ladyship. 'These poor stupid people simply don't know what to do. They are waiting to be told by a person of distinction whether they are, or

are not, to recognise your marriage. In plain English, they are waiting to be led by Me. Consider it done. I will lead them.'

"I thought my aunt was joking. The event of to-day has shown me that she is terribly in earnest. Lady Janet has issued invitations for one of her grand balls at Mablethorpe House; and she has caused the report to be circulated everywhere that the object of the festival is 'to celebrate the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Julian Gray!'

"I at first refused to be present. To my amazement, however, Mercy sides with my aunt. She reminds me of all that we both owe to Lady Janet; and she has persuaded me to alter my mind. We are to go to the ball—at my wife's express request!

"The meaning of this, as I interpret it, is that my poor love is still pursued in secret by the idea that my marriage has injured me in the general estimation. She will suffer anything, risk anything, believe anything, to be freed from that one haunting thought. Lady Janet predicts a social triumph; and my wife's despair—not my wife's conviction—accepts the prophecy. As for me, I am prepared for

the result. It will end in our going to the New World, and trying Society in its infancy, among the forests and the plains. I shall quietly prepare for our departure, and own what I have done at the right time—that is to say, when the ball is over."

FOURTH EXTRACT.

"I have met with the man for my purpose—an old college friend of mine, now partner in a firm of shipowners, largely concerned in emigration.

"One of their vessels sails for America, from the port of London, in a fortnight; touching at Plymouth. By a fortunate coincidence, Lady Janet's ball takes place in a fortnight. I see my way.

"Helped by the kindness of my friend, I have arranged to have a cabin kept in reserve, on payment of a small deposit. If the ball ends (as I believe it will) in new mortifications for Mercy—do what they may, I defy them to mortify *me*—I have only to say the word by telegraph, and we shall catch the ship at Plymouth.

"I know the effect it will have when I break

the news to her; but I am prepared with my remedy. The pages of my diary, written in past years, will show plainly enough that it is not *she* who is driving me away from England. She will see the longing in me for other work and other scenes, expressing itself over and over again, long before the time when we first met."

FIFTH EXTRACT.

"Mercy's ball-dress—a present from kind Lady Janet—is finished. I was allowed to see the first trial, or preliminary rehearsal, of this work of art. I don't in the least understand the merits of silk and lace; but one thing I know—my wife will be the most beautiful woman at the ball.

"The same day I called on Lady Janet to thank her, and encountered a new revelation of the wayward and original character of my dear old aunt.

"She was on the point of tearing up a letter when I went into her room. Seeing me, she suspended her purpose and handed me the letter. It was in Mercy's handwriting. Lady Janet pointed to a passage on the last page. 'Tell your wife, with my love,' she said, 'that

I am the most obstinate woman of the two. I positively refuse to read her, as I positively refuse to listen to her, whenever she attempts to return to that one subject. Now give me the letter back.' I gave it back, and saw it torn up before my face. The one topic prohibited to Mercy as sternly as ever, is still the personation of Grace Roseberry! Nothing could have been more naturally introduced, or more delicately managed, than my wife's brief reference to the subject. No matter. The reading of the first line was enough. Lady Janet shut her eyes and destroyed the letter —Lady Janet will live and die absolutely ignorant of the true story of 'Mercy Merrick.' What unanswerable riddles we are! Is it wonderful if we perpetually fail to understand one another?"

LAST EXTRACT.

"The morning after the ball.

"It is done and over. Society has beaten Lady Janet. I have neither patience nor time to write at any length of it. We leave for Plymouth by the afternoon express.

"We were rather late in arriving at the ball.

The magnificent rooms were filling fast. Walking through them with my wife, she drew my attention to a circumstance which I had not noticed at the time. 'Julian,' she said, 'look round among the ladies, and tell me if you see anything strange.' As I looked round the band began playing a waltz. I observed that a few people only passed by us to the dancing-room. I noticed next that of those few, fewer still were young. At last it burst upon me. With certain exceptions (so rare as to prove the rule), there were no young girls at Lady Janet's ball. I took Mercy at once back to the reception-room. Lady Janet's face showed that she too was aware of what had happened. The guests were still arriving. We received the men and their wives, the men and their mothers, the men and their grandmothers—but, in place of their unmarried daughters, elaborate excuses offered with a shameless politeness wonderful to see. Yes! This was how the matrons in high life had got over the difficulty of meeting Mrs. Julian Gray at Lady Janet's house!

"Let me do strict justice to every one. The ladies who *were* present showed the

needful respect for their hostess. They did their duty—no, overdid it, is perhaps the better phrase.

"I really had no adequate idea of the coarseness and rudeness which have filtered their way through society in these later times until I saw the reception accorded to my wife. The days of prudery and prejudice are days gone by. Excessive amiability and excessive liberality are the two favourite assumptions of the modern generation. To see the women expressing their liberal forgetfulness of my wife's misfortunes, and the men their amiable anxiety to encourage her husband—to hear the same set phrases repeated in every room: 'So charmed to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Gray; so *much* obliged to dear Lady Janet for giving us this opportunity! Julian, old man, what a beautiful creature! I envy you; upon my honour, I envy you!'—to receive this sort of welcome, emphasised by obtrusive hand-shakings, sometimes actually by downright kissings of my wife, and then to look round and see that not one in thirty of these very people had brought their unmarried daughters to the ball, was, I honestly believe,

to see civilised human nature in its basest conceivable aspect. The New World may have its disappointments in store for us—but it cannot possibly show us any spectacle so abject as the spectacle which we witnessed last night at my aunt's ball.

"Lady Janet marked her sense of the proceeding adopted by her guests, by leaving them to themselves. Her guests remained and supped heartily notwithstanding. They all knew by experience that there were no stale dishes and no cheap wines at Mablethorpe House. They drank to the end of the bottle, and they ate to the last truffle in the pie.

"Mercy and I had an interview with my aunt upstairs before we left. I felt it necessary to state plainly my resolution to leave England. The scene that followed was so painful, that I cannot prevail on myself to return to it in these pages. My wife is reconciled to our departure; and Lady Janet accompanies us as far as Plymouth—these are the results. No words can express my sense of relief now that it is all settled. The one sorrow I shall carry away with me from the

shores of England will be the sorrow of parting with dear warm-hearted Lady Janet. At her age it is a parting for life.

"So closes my connection with my own country. While I have Mercy by my side, I face the unknown future, certain of carrying my happiness with me, go where I may. We shall find five hundred adventurers like ourselves, when we join the emigrant ship, for whom their native land has no occupation and no home. Gentlemen of the Statistical Department, add two more to the number of social failures produced by England in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and seventy-one—Julian Gray and Mercy Merrick."

THE END.

BILLING, PRINTER, GUILDFORD, SURREY.

Digitized with financial assistance from the
Government of Maharashtra
on 18 July, 2018